

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

by

RICHARD A. CORDELL

THOMAS NELSON & SONS, LTD.
LONDON EDINBURGH PARIS MELBOURNE
TORONTO AND NEW YORK

All rights reserved

THOMAS NELSON & SONS LTD.

35-36 PATERNOSTER ROW, LONDON, E.C.4; PARKSIDE
WORKS, EDINBURGH; 25 RUE DENFERT-ROCHEREAU,
PARIS; 312 FLINDERS STREET, MELBOURNE;
91-93 WELLINGTON STREET WEST, TORONTO;
381-385 FOURTH AVENUE, NEW YORK

First published September, 1937

To ALICE

CONTENTS

<i>Part 1:</i> BIOGRAPHICAL	I
<i>Part 2:</i> THE NOVELIST	65
<i>Part 3:</i> DRAMATIST	143
<i>Part 4:</i> WRITER OF SHORT STORIES	241
<i>Part 5:</i> CRITIC AND TRAVELLER	281

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness to Mr. Maugham for his generous assistance to me in many ways, particularly for his allowing me to read *The Summing Up* in typescript before its publication; to Mr. Laird Bell for correction of proofs; and to Doubleday, Doran and Company of New York and William Heinemann, Limited, of London for permission to quote from Mr. Maugham's works.

Part I

BIOGRAPHICAL

AT A QUARTER past one the sombre dining room of the Club begins to come to life. Members and guests stroll in from the reading room and lounges where they have leisurely sipped their very dry martinis, for no such vulgarity as a cocktail bar is to be found in the Club. The small tables by the high windows are soon occupied, although no view of the street is afforded. The sound of street traffic—mostly lorries and barrows to and from Covent Garden—is scarcely heard in the austere room. Members of the Club—novelists, playwrights, architects, artists, editors, actors—greet one another as they move to their tables.

A short, slender, middle-aged man with thin brown hair combed straight back, a narrow mustache, and a somewhat sallow complexion enters with a guest, to whom he is showing the Club's famous paintings, for the most part portraits of well-known eighteenth and nineteenth century actors and actresses.

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

"That is, of course, not an actor, but Thackeray. My father proposed him for membership in this Club," he says, not too casually, for he is free from affectation. A very infrequent visitor to the Club he is greeted on all sides. "Hello, Maugham! When did you get in town?" "Well, Maugham! On your way to Singapore or just back from Pitcairn Island?"

He and his companion find a table and order their lunch. Somerset Maugham is in good form today. He points out celebrated authors and actors and comments dryly and wittily upon them. He does not conceal his likes and dislikes. With pomposness and insincerity he has little patience. A world-famous dramatist saunters over to him and drawls as he taps his monocle on his thumb.

"It's so tiresome. I'm afraid, Maugham, I shall have to go to Hollywood after all. I can't stave them off any longer, and I don't want to leave London."

"Then why go? You don't have to go if you don't want to," says Somerset Maugham a bit testily. And when the weary playwright has left he adds sharply, "A very silly man."

At a neighbouring table are two elderly, white-haired men and a very young man obviously under twenty. The old men, in a jocular mood somewhat incongruous in this sedate and decorous hall, are bantering the wine-steward, questioning the genu-

BIOGRAPHICAL

ineness of his Liebfraumilch '21. The grave, black-suited wine-steward, whose dignity is fortified by his sign of office, a great silver chain around his neck, does not relax before their waggishness. The boy regards with unconcealed admiration and awe the levity with which his companions treat so august and formidable a personage.

"Look at those two old men and that boy," says Somerset Maugham. "There sit one of the greatest artists in England and one of its most widely read novelists. The boy, probably down from school for the day, watches their every move, drinks in their every word, with adoration. This lunch with such a pair of celebrities is a red-letter event in his life. Note his attitude of reverence, of worship even. He can scarcely believe that it is true that the gods are so kind to him as to allow him to sit at table with such paragons. He does not suspect that their sprightliness and good-humor are the result of a long series of whisky-and-sodas this morning. He does not dream that they are a pair of earthy old reprobates who a long time ago found the youthful practice of sowing wild oats so pleasant that they have continued doing so for fifty years. The dazzled youth, remembering with veneration the lovely paintings of one and the inspirational fiction of the other, suspects nothing. Was there ever a greater gap between idealism and reality, a more pathetic and ludicrous

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

romanticizing? What a series of shocks and painful disillusionments that innocent boy is bound to suffer in the next few years. . . .”

His eyes shine as his shrewd analysis of character and situation resolves itself easily into words. This is not Somerset Maugham the cosmopolite, the traveller, the clubman, the somewhat bored and cynical man of the world; this is Somerset Maugham the fashioner of stories, who has for the thousandth time discovered pulsing drama close at hand. For the moment he abandons himself to the exquisite pleasure of weaving into a pattern the materials his keen observation and nimble imagination have suddenly heaped before him.

“Hello, Maugham! Heard you were back from the States. Off for home tonight, I suppose?”

“Hello, Harry. I want you to meet . . .” and instantly Somerset Maugham is again the raconteur, the clubman. But his luncheon companion has for an unforgettable moment glimpsed Somerset Maugham the creative artist, and has half-way witnessed the alchemy of genius whereby the raw materials of life become such works of art as “Red,” “The Bookbag,” “Footprints in the Jungle,” and “The Outstation.”

BIOGRAPHICAL

AS THE name indicates, the Maughams are of Celtic extraction; the family is of Irish origin. But centuries ago, ancestors of Somerset Maugham migrated to Westmoreland and prospered there as gentlemen farmers and local government officials. When Somerset Maugham's great-grandfather suffered financial losses during the Napoleonic Wars, he sent his son to London to study law. Robert Armand Maugham became an eminent lawyer and popular author of books on legal subjects. He helped found the Incorporated Law Society and for more than twenty-five years was the proprietor and editor of the *Legal Observer*. In 1856, six years before his death, members of the Law Society subscribed £600 for a testimonial to him, and presented him with a huge silver service which has been a white elephant in the Maugham family for more than eighty years. Robert Armand Maugham, Junior, also became a lawyer but never achieved his father's eminence. He did not give himself completely to law, for he enjoyed travel and art and society. He travelled to Asia Minor and Africa. He collected a huge library. Soon after 1850 he was appointed Solicitor to the British Embassy in Paris, a position he held until

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

his death in 1884. He was well known to English residents in Paris, and both he and his beautiful and cultivated wife had a large acquaintance among French writers and politicians.

Mrs. Maugham came of a genteel family who were distressed when she married a mere solicitor. Her father, Somerset Maugham's maternal grandfather, was an army officer who was stationed in India. Upon his death, his widow, a woman of energy, charm, and talent, squandered a large fortune, and then lived in France on her pension. To augment her income, she wrote sentimental novels in French, and composed popular music. She was evidently what her gifted grandson would call a woman of character. Her daughter, Somerset Maugham's mother, was endowed with extraordinary beauty and charm. She was twenty years younger than her ugly husband, but she was devoted to him. Their home was on the Avenue d'Antin, one of the pleasant streets radiating from the Rond Point in the Champs d'Élysées. They moved in interesting circles in Paris society, partly because of Robert Maugham's professional associations, and partly because of the loveliness and glamour of Mrs. Maugham. Prosper Mérimée, Gustave Doré, and other noted Parisians of the day were intimate friends.

But fate was malevolent. Robert Maugham was attacked by cancer, and his wife by tuberculosis of

BIOGRAPHICAL

the lungs. According to a widely accepted theory of the time, child-bearing was beneficial to a woman suffering from this disease. Mrs. Maugham bore six sons, but in vain. William was only eight when she died and never remembered her very clearly; however, he has never forgotten her great beauty, which disease did not ravish, but made more fragile and ethereal. He has recently said that more than fifty years have failed to heal the wound caused by his mother's death. The boy was taken out of the French school he had been attending and was sent every day to the rooms of the English clergyman attached to the British Embassy, who had the unusual task of teaching an English boy his own language, for William (or Willie—he was not to be known as Somerset for fifteen years) Maugham spoke French before he learned English. The method of teaching him English was to make him read aloud the police court news in the *Standard*. Thus in his early years he possibly was impressed by the dramatic and melodramatic in daily life. Unaware that his own ailment was so serious, Robert Maugham had a new country house built at Suresnes, on a hilltop overlooking the Seine. He designed it himself, and his love of travel and the exotic found expression in certain bizarre and extravagant features of the house. He never lived in his new home. After a very painful illness he died of cancer of the stomach in 1884.

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

The orphaned boy was sent to England to live with his father's brother, Henry, Vicar of Whitstable, in Kent. Whitstable is a pleasant, old-fashioned market town on the Kentish coast near the mouth of the Thames. Its harbour is often crowded with fishing craft, and in Somerset Maugham's boyhood the coal shipments from the North of England gave further animation to the docks. Whitstable has never become a resort to be mentioned in the same breath with Ramsgate or Margate, but it has a substantial, homely charm that the flashier holiday centres lack. In the 1880's attempts were made by some ambitious citizens to exploit Whitstable's air and beaches, and a number of seaside cottages and hotels were erected. The professional folk and gentry looked with distaste on such vulgar enterprise. Class distinction was rigorous, and the summer visitors, whatever they might be in the winter, were ignored, or treated with the condescension accorded to tradespeople, fishermen, and chapel-goers. To this day, Whitstable has a sturdy Kentish earthiness about it. It is a place to live in with seriousness and decorum throughout the year; it does not encourage vacation levity.

The happy days of William's early childhood were behind him. The ten-year-old boy found the vicarage a terrifyingly different world from the gracious, civilized ménage on the Avenue d'Antin. Gone was the easy, delightful life in France, a life of charming

BIOGRAPHICAL

casualness. His one religious teaching had been to take off his hat when passing a priest on the street. Life at the vicarage was a matter of rigid routine, without buoyancy and laughter. His uncle and aunt were middle-aged and childless, kind at heart but thoroughly incompetent to assume their new task. Somerset Maugham has described his uncle with brutal frankness in *Of Human Bondage* and in *Cakes and Ale*. Henry MacDonald Maugham, M. A., had already been Vicar of Whitstable for fourteen years when his ten-year-old nephew was thrust into his care. He was not a vicious man (he was not unpopular among the parishioners, some of whom, to be sure, thought him odd) but he had the lazy man's worship of an easy, fixed routine which protects him from disturbance. His adoring German wife devoted her life to serving him, and acting as a buffer between him and the irritations of everyday life. As a result, he was egregiously spoiled, and the disturbing presence of a growing boy in his house gave rise to numerous distressing vexations. It is probable that Somerset Maugham has described his uncle too harshly, but it must be remembered that *Of Human Bondage* and *Cakes and Ale* are primarily works of fiction, not biographies.

He was unhappy and did not meet his uncle half-way. He was extremely small and in poor health; he stammered badly; his inordinate shyness was in-

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

terpreted as sullenness; even as a child he craved freedom, and he was repelled by the irksome conventions of life in the vicarage. He was bewildered by the feuds with local dissenters and by the Victorian gentility and snobbishness which cut him off from wholesome companionships. The memories of the pleasant years in France and the miserable seven years in Kent, have never been erased from his mind. He has chosen France for his home, and although honour and recognition in England, together with a tolerant philosophy, have made him pay many happy visits to England in recent years, he feels more at ease in France. (Nevertheless he considers London the most beautiful city in the World.) In *The Summing Up* he confesses that he is attached to England but that he never feels very much at home there, and that he has never felt entirely himself until he has crossed the Channel. Whitstable was a thriving market town and seaport, which could have provided the growing boy with colour and adventure, but absurd restrictions of "gentility" insulated him against the real life of the community. Never did a boy so need a Huck Finn for a companion as did William Maugham in those years.

His school years were even more wretched. When he was thirteen he entered a preparatory school at Canterbury (seven miles inland from Whitstable), an annex to King's School. King's School, one of

BIOGRAPHICAL

the smaller English public schools, is housed in beautiful old buildings alongside Canterbury Cathedral. Somerset Maugham has never admitted it, but his deep love of beauty must owe something to King's School and its environs. Canterbury is one of the world's loveliest cities, and the Cathedral, cloisters, and gardens achieve a perfection in architecture and prospect like the perfection of style Somerset Maugham strives for in his writing. Although pilgrims and sight-seers have been coming to Canterbury for a thousand years, its beauty and treasures have never become commercialised; no blatant traffic of souvenirs or importunity of guides has debased it. King's School was in 1884 a school for gentlemen's sons, and consequently the academic emphasis was on the classics. The ritual of good form was preached and practised and the religious rites of the Church of England were scrupulously administered. Although good form prevented cheating and dishonesty, and religious form (and pressure from school officials) assured strict attendance at prayers and services, the boys were barbarous enough to torment the newcomer, and to make a veritable purgatory of his first years. King's School is still an institution for young gentlemen, and in spite of increased gymnasium facilities, courses in military tactics, adequate showerbaths, and central heating, the education is still designed for gentlemen.

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

The story of these years is faithfully recorded in *Of Human Bondage*. Neither in the lower school nor in King's School was he able to adjust himself. His frail health and disinclination for games precluded the popularity he secretly yearned for. That he should be tormented by his school mates because of a defect of speech is understandable, for the young are naturally cruel; but that the masters should bully him and be impatient of his stammering is incredible, but true.

It is quite probable that Somerset Maugham's defect of speech resulted in an introspection which led him to be an observer and writer rather than a professional man. The misery that his stammering brought to him was as poignant as that inflicted by Philip Carey's malformation in *Of Human Bondage*, but the novelist wisely gave Philip a clubfoot instead of a stammer; for to those not afflicted, stuttering, like toothache or hayfever, is in some measure ludicrous; whereas a crippled foot easily excites pathos. In a preface Mr. Maugham wrote for *The Old Wives Tale*, he includes these comments on Arnold Bennett's stammer—they might almost have been written about himself: "Everyone knows that Arnold was afflicted with a very bad stammer; it was painful to watch the struggle he had sometimes to get the words out. It was torture to him. Few realised the exhaustion it caused him to speak. What

BIOGRAPHICAL

to most men was as easy as breathing, to him was a constant strain. It tore his nerves to pieces. Few knew the humiliation it exposed him to, the ridicule it excited in many, the impatience it aroused, the awkwardness of feeling that it made people find him tiresome; and the minor exasperation of thinking of a good, amusing or apt remark and not venturing to say it in case the stammer ruined it. Few knew the distressing sense it gave rise to of a bar to complete contact with other men. It may be that except for the stammer which forced him to introspection, Arnold would never have become a writer. But I think it not the least proof of his strong and sane character, that, notwithstanding this impediment, he was able to retain his splendid balance and regard the normal life of man from a normal point of view.”* In recent years Somerset Maugham has had the good fortune to overcome to a great extent his speech difficulty. It is possible that increasing freedom from speech trouble may have contributed somewhat to the relative mellowing of philosophy, the tranquillity, the increased tolerance noticeable especially in *Don Fernando* and *The Summing Up*.

When he got out of the lower forms, he became rather seriously ill. An examination showed his lungs to be affected, and his alarmed guardians, remembering that his mother and aunt had died of tuber-

* *Fifty Modern Writers*, Doubleday, Doran and Company, Copyright, 1933.

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

culosis, sent him to Hyères in the South of France. Here he was happy once more. The sun shone and the days sang again. He enjoyed a not uncommon experience of adolescent boys—he fell in love with the wife of his tutor, without fully realising that he had done so. After a few months he had regained his health and returned to England, but the bleak life at King's School italicized in his memory the joyous, carefree life in France. He determined that he would not go to Oxford and become a clergyman as his uncle desired, and that he must get away from England for at least a year.



His uncle consented to allow him to spend a year in Germany, and his aunt, who was German, made arrangements for his sojourn in Heidelberg. He never became officially a member of the University. Although he did not matriculate, he took advantage of the lectures, library, and intellectual stimulation of a university community. In European university cities there are always in residence many students who are hungry to learn, but who for financial or other reasons are not candidates for degrees. Here he demonstrated anew the fallacy of the smug generalisation that anticipation is greater than realisa-

BIOGRAPHICAL

tion. He was happier than he had dared dream he might be. He was free and could breathe again. His companions introduced him to the pleasures of art and poetry and the theatre. He stood on a hill overlooking the Rhine valley and was scourged and exhilarated for the first time by the mystic, almost unbearable feeling for beauty. Over mugs of beer he and his friends debated the great and insoluble problems of life. He attended Kuno Fischer's lectures on Schopenhauer. He cast off the misfit mantle of Christianity which his uncle and masters had forced upon him. He knew the keen delights of the free play of mind on mind, and he exulted in his "emancipation" with the fierce and arrogant intolerance of youth. And at Heidelberg, he decided upon his lifework—writing.

Although an agnostic (not by choice but by nature) Somerset Maugham has always been deeply interested in religion. He enjoyed and suffered the common mystical religious experiences of puberty; but doubt was born in him when, in spite of complete faith (and only a speck of faith will move a mountain) his prayer to be relieved of stammering was not answered. At Heidelberg he defended his dimly-realised religious notions against the vaporous religiosity of Brown, a fellow-student, and the relentless scepticism of another companion. In late books, such as *Don Fernando* and *The Summing*

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

Up, he exhibits not only a bold tolerance of, but a sympathy with, the mystic and mystical experience. He always expresses respect and sometimes even awe for the religions of the East, and admiration for the Catholic Missionaries. The years, that brought him what he considers release from the bondage of the religion of his fathers, have also brought a great tolerance.

He returned to England determined to become a writer, but to announce to his guardian that at the age of nineteen he had chosen literature as his profession was unthinkable. What to do? He would not consider entering the Church. It was proposed that he become a civil servant, but his aunt and uncle had been told that civil servants are often thrown with people who are not gentlemen. He was indifferent to the family profession; three older brothers were already practising law. Uncle Henry had heard that there was a demand for chartered accountants, and that many young *gentlemen* had been attracted to accountancy. So the would-be author was articled to a Chartered Accountant, but he loathed the work and deserted it after six weeks. Then he himself proposed that he study medicine, and his uncle and aunt agreed.

He entered St. Thomas's Medical School in 1892. St. Thomas' Hospital is of monastic origin and dates from the thirteenth century. Its group of eight build-

BIOGRAPHICAL

ings (one of which houses the Medical School) fronts the Thames directly across from the Houses of Parliament. The work of the Hospital has from the beginning been largely charitable in nature. It serves the Borough of Lambeth, which, with the neighbouring Boroughs of Southwark, Camberwell, Battersea, and Wandsworth, houses many of the poor of London. The indigent were usually treated at the Out-Patients' Department. When Somerset Maugham was a student, there were about twenty-five thousand out-patients a year. The Medical School had (and has) a high reputation, and in addition it offered the would-be author an opportunity to live in London and to gain experience of life, which he wisely felt a writer must have.

For two years he was unable to arouse any interest in his studies. He was not a satisfactory student, and did no more than was necessary. He kept very much alone and formed no close friendships among his fellow-students, who, somewhat to their chagrin, are today unable to remember except very vaguely the shy young man who has become famous. There were no official dormitories, and the students engaged rooms in Lambeth, as related in *Of Human Bondage*. Somerset Maugham lived with a group of young men not associated with St. Thomas's; they were writers, musicians, painters, who perhaps gave a balance to these years which association only with

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

medical students would not have provided. He spent his spare time reading widely in English and European literature, writing, and filling notebooks with ideas for plays and stories. He did not enter into the life of the Hospital more than was necessary.

Then at the end of his second year his interest quickened when he became a clerk in the Out-Patients' Department. Instead of theories, chemical formulae, diagrams, and drawings, here was life itself. The novelist and dramatist in him became alert. He saw life at first hand, stripped of pretence, gentility, reticence. He saw suffering, fear, despair, and terror; he saw hope, courage, and bravery. He saw demonstrated before him the falseness of the platitude that suffering ennobles; he learned that more often it degrades. He wryly noted, in the manner of Roche-foucauld, "We learn resignation not by our own suffering but by the suffering of others." He worked in the wards, and then as an obstetric clerk he brought sixty-two children into the world; in cynical moods he has since pondered over the worth of the achievement. It was while obstetric clerk that he wrote *Liza of Lambeth*, almost a transcript of his own experience as he worked as *accoucheur* in the bleak tenements of the slums.

BIOGRAPHICAL



Liza of Lambeth was completed in 1896 and published in 1897. The death of his uncle Henry in September, 1897 (his wife had died some years earlier) provided William with a useful legacy. It also removed the last family pressure and left him more determined than ever to devote himself to writing. (There seems to have been little or no interference by William's older brothers. The eldest, Frederick, became as eminent in law as his famous grandfather and in 1935 was raised to the peerage and made a chief justice of England.) *Liza of Lambeth* was successful enough to encourage him in his resolve not to practise medicine. His last long school holiday was spent in Florence, gathering material for his second novel, *The Making of a Saint*, which he wrote in Capri. In 1898 he was qualified, and became a Member of the Royal College of Surgeons and a Licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians. The success of *Liza of Lambeth* attracted the attention of the faculty and he was offered an appointment. But he refused; he has never practised. He has since expressed regret that his first novel had not failed so that he might have been forced to continue with medicine and add to his reservoir of

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

experience. His years at St. Thomas's were invaluable to him in three ways. They afforded him the opportunity of living in London and gaining the "experience of life" he had yearned for. They gave him a sound knowledge of science; an acquaintance with the writings of the great biologists and physicists engendered in him a respect for the scientific method. His native tendency toward realism was thereby strengthened and he was able to steer clear of the preciosity and anemic aestheticism of the period when he was a young man learning his craft. And lastly, during his years of work in the hospital and slums, he acquired a knowledge of mankind that he would never have gained over the teacups or on the playing fields at Oxford. His imagination was fired by the drama of life, and the unaccountability of human nature.



HE YEARNED to write for the stage, but discovered that an unknown writer had but a slight chance of having a play accepted. He wrote novels, then, for two reasons: to establish a reputation, and to make a living, for the inheritance that he had received when he was twenty-one, and the legacy when he was twenty-three, had been used up. He had

BIOGRAPHICAL

written a trifling one-act play in Germany, *Schiffbrüchig*, and had been deliriously happy when it was performed in a sort of *Café-Concert*. In 1898 he wrote his first play in English, *A Man of Honour*, but no manager would consider it. In the same year his second novel, *The Making of a Saint* was published. Although the young author was urged by his publishers to follow up the moderate success of *Liza of Lambeth* with another novel of the slums (he had enough material in his notebooks for a dozen such novels) he refused, and boldly attempted a historical novel. *The Making of a Saint* was a relative failure, for it puzzled readers whose notions of historical romance were still derived from Robert Louis Stevenson. Somerset Maugham was right in refusing to capitalize further on the slums; he had exhausted his interest in the material, and although *The Making of a Saint* did not find many readers, it was a useful exercise for its author, and helped indicate to him his forte and his limitations.

The urge to travel found as much expression as his limited means would allow. His journeys to France, Germany, and Italy have been mentioned. Soon after leaving St. Thomas's he made the first of many visits to Spain and he filled his notebooks to overflowing. His two books about Spain, *The Land of the Blessed Virgin* (1905) and *Don Fernando* (1935) bespeak his affection for that coun-

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

try. He has always preferred Seville to most cities and has more than once referred (a little too archly for Somerset Maugham) to an idyllic love affair there when he was something-and-twenty. Few writers have travelled more widely. Before his success in the theatre he made brief and economical journeys to France, Spain, Italy, and Greece; later he was to travel to the Americas, the South Seas, Asia—not once but repeatedly. He derives subjects and inspirations from new scenes, new customs, new mores. He knows how Kipling's genius deserted him when the great roamer became a crotchety country squire. He and Kipling differ from Jane Austen and Eden Phillpotts, who are content to play, and play well, a number of variations on the same theme. He could have written endlessly about Kent, as Eden Phillpotts has written about Devonshire and as Hardy wrote about Wessex; but his urge to travel is a symptom of his restlessness of mind and insatiable curiosity which have made the whole world, not Kent, his oyster.

In 1899 was published *Orientations*, his third book and his first volume of short stories. Two of the stories had been submitted in 1896 to T. Fisher Unwin, who was so impressed by them that he encouraged the author to try his hand at a novel. In 1900 he visited Kent, and gathered material for several novels. Although he spent unhappy years of his

BIOGRAPHICAL

childhood there, he has never disliked Canterbury and Whitstable; in fact, he describes the countryside and the gray, bleak seascape with affection, and in some of his Asiatic sketches one can detect a note of nostalgia. (He has not, however, revisited Kent in many years.) The first of the Kentish novels was *The Hero*, published in 1901, a satirical novel suggested by the Boer War. It stirred the reviewers, but made no impression on the public. In 1902 appeared *Mrs. Craddock*, which he had written before *The Hero*. *Mrs. Craddock* is one of his best novels. From the beginning it has had enthusiastic admirers, and has been reissued many times. It was bold—shocking, for 1902—but unfortunately for the author's royalties, not many people exposed themselves to the shock. Astute reviewers and critics, however, were becoming aware of him. *Mrs. Craddock* was much better written than *Liza of Lambeth*, and there was no more compromise or evasion in his realism than in the tragic story of Liza.



THE more strenuously intellectual of his admirers felt that their enthusiasm (decorously restrained) for the young writer was justified when they witnessed a production of his first play. He had written

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

A Man of Honour in 1898, but he was unable to get it produced until the Stage Society put it on for two performances in 1903. "Et ego in Arcadia vixi—I too have been a highbrow," Somerset Maugham says of his first play, which, to modern taste, is far from highbrow. Nevertheless, it was sufficiently grim to make a commercial success impossible, and the fact that the arty Stage Society had produced the play actually did the aspiring playwright harm in the commercial theatre. He had had, however, a play performed in a London Theatre; he had heard his words spoken by Granville-Barker and Nigel Playfair. His hope for recognition in the theatre was not dimmed by the polite burial of *A Man of Honour* by the Stage Society, and he proceeded to write the three comedies which within five years were to make him rich and celebrated.

For a time after the production of *A Man of Honour* he lived in Paris in a small flat on the fifth floor of a house in Montparnasse. He dined regularly with a group of painters, sculptors, and writers at the Chat Blanc in the rue d'Odessa. They were of all nationalities and the conversation was carried on indifferently in English and French. They discussed every subject under the sun and differed with extreme acrimony. They were very highbrow. The heated discussions of art, letters, and morality at the Chat Blanc reappear in the café scenes

BIOGRAPHICAL

in *The Magician*, and in *Of Human Bondage* in the convivial debates of Philips, Cronshaw, Lawson, Clutten, and Flanagan. It was the most Bohemian period in Somerset Maugham's life, but at the age of thirty he passed through it with an amused detachment unshared by his enthusiastic companions. It was in Paris at this time that he became acquainted with Arnold Bennett (Somerset Maugham was thirty and Bennett was thirty-seven). Perhaps the fact that both stammered strengthened the acquaintance into something more than casual association.

In the meantime he had to live. His novels paid scanty royalties, his book reviewing paid even less, and his one attempt at dramatic criticism (of Pinero's *Iris*) drew from the editor the comment that Somerset Maugham had no sense of the theatre. He never, however, suffered from lack of money as did Philip Carey in an agonizing section of *Of Human Bondage*. He was far from affluent during these years (1897-1907) and developed a canny, healthy, and lasting respect for money. "Money is like a sixth sense without which one cannot make a complete use of the other five" is one of his favorite platitudes. He and Lawrence Housman attempted to revive the mid-nineteenth century annual, and published two numbers of *The Venture*—in 1903 and 1904. Each annual has an amazing array of contributors. In the first issue were selections by John

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

Masefield, G. K. Chesterton, Thomas Hardy, Mrs. Meynell, A. E. Housman, Stephen Phillips, Violet Hunt, Francis Thompson, Havelock Ellis, Laurence Binyon, and Somerset Maugham, who included his translation of his first play, *Schiffbrüchig*. There were woodcuts by Gordon Craig, T. Sturge Moore, Charles Ricketts, and Reginald Savage. In the 1904 number were contributions by Edmund Gosse, W. B. Maxwell, Alfred Noyes, Alice Meynell, Edward Thomas, Arthur Symons, Gordon Bottomley, and James Joyce; and contributing artists were Whistler, Frank Brangwyn, Orpen, Sargent, and Augustus John. It was an astonishing feat to gather all these names together, but no one made any money, and a third issue did not appear.



IN 1904 he suffered another disappointment when his experimental novel *The Merry-go-Round* failed. In 1905 he published his first travel book, *The Land of the Blessed Virgin*, which was a labour of love—a temporary love of fine writing and a permanent love of Spain. It did not sell. Somewhat discouraged (even Max Beerbohm advised him to give up writing for the stage) and in need of money he took a rejected play, *Loaves and Fishes* (rejected because the

BIOGRAPHICAL

principal character, an Anglican bishop, is held up to ridicule) and turned it into a novel in a few weeks' time. *The Bishop's Apron* was sufficiently successful to relieve him financially and to restore his sagging confidence. Then suddenly the tide turned. George Tyler, an American producer with a sharp sense of the theatre and a predilection for gambling (over ninety per cent of the plays he backed were hitherto unacted), bought Somerset Maugham's comedy, *Lady Frederick*, and advanced enough on royalties to enable him to live frugally in Italy for a year. The sale of a short story in addition provided a luxurious side-trip to Sicily. But it seemed as though Tyler were going to lose on his gamble: no actress would consider playing Lady Frederick, who in one scene "did" her hair and applied various strata of cosmetics. The young playwright submitted *Mrs. Dot* and *Jack Straw*, in which he zealously tried to please managers, actors, and public. Both plays were refused.

Then came the providential ill-wind. Otho Stuart, who was putting on "literary" plays at the Court Theatre, had a failure more immediate than usual, and he needed a stop-gap, something that would run the six weeks until he could get his next play ready. With some misgiving he was persuaded to put on *Lady Frederick*. It was a crashing success, and managers (with cheque books) sought out the dazed

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

young writer and competed for the plays which they had previously rejected. *Lady Frederick* was produced in November, 1907; *Jack Straw*, at the Vaudeville in March, 1908; *Mrs. Dot* at the Comedy the following month; and *The Explorer* at the Lyric in June, 1908. The last-named play had only a moderate success, but the first three ran for a year. He established a record by having four plays performed concurrently in London.

Somerset Maugham was then thirty-four years old. He had already acquired a philosophy of life which enabled him to bear fame (notoriety, he has insisted on calling it) with equanimity. He had learned to evaluate his fellow-men, and saw not with distress but with amusement that selflessness is a harmless abstraction. The sudden turn in his own fortunes did not impress him particularly, but he saw that financial success means independence, which he treasured above all things. George Doran, the publisher, has said of him that he is a shrewd bargainer, with a proper and equitable appraisal of the value of his work.

But Maugham shrewdly laid the foundation for the comfortable fortune which has secured for him his freedom and independence. Since 1907 he has written to please himself. "Sometimes the result has pleased others, and then my play has succeeded; sometimes it has not, and then my play has failed:

BIOGRAPHICAL

but so far as I am concerned it has always succeeded, for my pleasure was independent of the result. Under a sedate exterior I enjoy high spirits and I write, as the crickets chirrup, without the anguish of mind some writers confess to, because it is my nature to."

Success did not bring him self-satisfaction. He was aware of his imperfections and studied constantly how to overcome them. He has always termed himself a professional writer, and he has set for himself professional standards that demand little less than perfection. When public acclaim was the loudest, he humbly studied the great prose writers. He wanted to write better. He read Dryden, Swift, Newman, Matthew Arnold, Voltaire, Hume. He wanted to write prose which was simple, lucid, and euphonious. Only the least critical reader could fail to note his progress. *Mrs. Craddock* is better written than *Liza of Lambeth*; *Of Human Bondage* is better written than *Mrs. Craddock*; and the style of *The Gentleman in the Parlour* and *Don Fernando* comes even closer to the perfection he has aimed at.



BUT he wanted to live as well as write. When a young man he determined to get as much as possible out of the one life allotted to him. Like Philip

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

Carey he saw his days behind and ahead of him as mosaics in a pattern, and although a determinist, resolved to help shape that pattern. The years taught him, like Philip, the delusion of free-will (man is tied to a stake, and his freedom of action consists in occasionally determining whether he shall trot around clockwise or counter-clockwise in the prescribed circle), and he came to the not unpleasant conclusion that man is able to view and study the pattern of his life rather than to design and complete that pattern. He saw that writing should, and would, be an integral part of the pattern, but he wanted a well-rounded life that would include many activities. He bought a house in Mayfair and furnished it with old furniture, for he considered Edwardian furniture most unattractive, and pictures by contemporary French artists, whose worth he was among the first to detect. For a number of years he was drawn into the social whirl as much as his shy and anti-social nature would permit. He observed. He prepared himself to write the series of comedies of manners unequalled for brilliancy and wit since those of Congreve and Sheridan.

Relieved of the necessity of writing novels he devoted himself to the drama. When *Lady Frederick* brought him good fortune, he had two novels almost ready for publication. *The Explorer*, a novelization of the rejected play, was partly inspired by the Kip-

BIOGRAPHICAL

ling vogue. It is not distinguished in style and lacks sincerity. *The Magician*, an attempt at a horror story, is perhaps the most nearly unreadable of all the author's books. These two novels were published in 1908, and his next novel did not appear until seven years later. In the collected edition of his works Somerset Maugham has included neither *The Explorer* nor *The Magician*, and asks that they be forgotten. *The Explorer* is all but forgotten; but in recent years renewed interest in the Gothic-horror type of novel has lifted *The Magician* from oblivion, and it has been reissued in a popular edition. Fortunately the author's reputation is weather-proof.



MIDDLE-AGED and older people look back with nostalgia on the period just before the outbreak of the World War. How smooth and golden those years seem to one who passed through the agony of the war, the post-war hysteria, the economic collapse! When one thumbs through periodicals published between 1908 and 1914, he has an uneasy feeling that the world of the *Tatler* and the *Spectator* of Addison and Steele is no further removed from our own than these unruffled years. The world was drifting to disaster but no one knew. (The period is bril-

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

liantly analyzed by Bernard Shaw in the Preface to *Heartbreak House*.) Never has life offered so many civilized amenities to the favoured. The poor knew their place and did not defy Divine Providence by trying to exchange it for another. Agitators and grumbler were generally ignored, and their muttering never penetrated the plate-glass club windows on Piccadilly. The politely disgruntled fought bloodless duels on the letter page of the *Times*. Arts, Music, and Drama flourished under the patronage of a leisure class of wealth and taste. Hyde Park was a parade ground of fashion, where for years odorous and noisy petrol carriages were not admitted. The London "seasons" were radiant, and extravagance did not hide itself, half-ashamed, behind charity. England was no longer the workshop of the world, but she was still an important manufacturing country; thousands of Englishmen battened on the exports, and thousands of others had enormous incomes from foreign and colonial investments. They spent their money at the Carlton, the Ritz, the Berkeley, the Savoy, at Christie's, at Covent Garden even. Socialist taxation had not as yet wrung from them their country houses and stables and five-storey houses in Mayfair and Belgravia.

The theatre in these years prospered with no competition from cinema or wireless. The lowbrows patronized the music halls, the Lyceum, and the

BIOGRAPHICAL

numerous theatres (not in the West End) devoted to melodrama. The intelligentsia sought out the furtive productions of Ibsen and his disciples, the brave production of plays of the Irish and Manchester schools, and the sometimes popular plays of Shaw. The well-to-do filled the boxes and stalls of the fashionable theatres, such as the Criterion, and the respectful lower classes admired the well-to-do from the pit and upper circle. Many of the plays, especially comedies, were written for a class as deliberately as were the comedies of the late seventeenth century. But the audience of 1912 had little in common with the Restoration audience except in outward opulence and liveliness. It was more refined, more moral, more gracious to the poor. All Britain was shaken when Eliza Doolittle said "bloody" in *Pygmalion*. But it was a satisfactory audience and society for the production of high comedy—artificial comedy, it was called. Somerset Maugham wrote a half dozen of the best artificial comedies since *The School for Scandal*. No one could have been better fitted for the task: he had a keen sense of the theatre, an inside knowledge of society, a shrewd acquaintance with man's follies and artifices, and enough urbanity not to be outraged by them. He could write sparkling dialogue and create the glitter necessary to this type of comedy.

In 1909 he wrote a trivial short play, *The Noble*

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

Spaniard, for his friend Charles Hawtrey. Then he experimented with two comedies a bit bolder and more serious in theme and his luck did not desert him. *Penelope*, which he wrote for Marie Tempest, and which Ethel Barrymore performed in America, and *Smith*, written for Marie Löhr, drew the town. By this time his early champions among the intelligentsia had deserted him for Granville-Barker ("brimming over with other people's ideas", Somerset Maugham said of him), and the drama of ideas. They looked with grave suspicion upon his commercial success, which indicated that his plays could not be very lit'ry. The newspaper critics regretted his cynicism; the critics of the serious weeklies deplored his triviality. But he went ahead with his pattern in mind; all these plays were a means to an end. In 1910 he had a slight set-back with two plays, *The Tenth Man* and *Landed Gentry*, which fell between the two stools of realism and melodrama. He was not yet prepared to write a credible serious play. In 1911 a comedy rejected years before, *Loaves and Fishes*, was produced, the play which he had novelized as *The Bishop's Apron*. *Loaves and Fishes* is one of the best of his early comedies, but it failed because it held the cloth up to ridicule. In 1912 he began writing *Of Human Bondage* and had little time for the theatre. In 1913 he adapted Molière's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* for Sir Herbert Beerbohm

BIOGRAPHICAL

Tree, who produced it at His Majesty's Theatre with original music by Strauss; an opera-interlude, "Ariadne in Naxos," was produced by Sir Thomas Beecham.

In 1914 he achieved a popular success with a serious play, *The Land of Promise*, one of the author's favourites. It played to crowded houses from February to August. Then suddenly came the blow-up of the War, which brought this golden age to an abrupt end, demoralized such trivia as theatres, and reduced the novelist and dramatist to very small fry indeed in a terrified world. Whitehall, and not Piccadilly Circus and Shaftesbury Avenue, suddenly held the limelight.

At the outbreak of the war Somerset Maugham was forty years old and realised that he had reached the end of one phase of his career—or, in his favourite metaphor, he had completed a section of the pattern of his life. He was just finishing *Of Human Bondage*, which, he tells us had to be written to free himself of certain tormenting memories of the past. "I was writing to free myself of an intolerable obsession." When he finished the novel, he experienced the *katharsis* he had longed for, and looked ahead to a new direction of life. He was suddenly tired of the glittering life about him—parties, dances, country-house gatherings, empty love affairs, friends of social and artistic circles all

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

cut to a conventional pattern; he grew tired even of the easy prerogatives of worldly success. What to do? He thought of marriage (the marriage of Philip and Sally at the end of *Of Human Bondage* is a literary exercise in wish-fulfilment). He thought of long journeys to distant parts of the world. The war answered his question for him.



ALTHOUGH he had never practised medicine, he selected a type of war work in which he could be of most use—and became a member of a Red Cross Ambulance Unit. For a time he was a dresser. Then, desiring to drive an ambulance, he took a fortnight's leave, and before he returned from England learned to drive a motor car. He enjoyed the new life. The crowded days of fixed routine gave him a curious sense of freedom, of lack of responsibility. As at St. Thomas's twenty years before, he again saw human nature stripped of artifice and convention; he again saw the melodrama of life. During his free hours, in the sound and range of German guns, he corrected proofs of *Of Human Bondage*.

One war experience in particular left its mark on him. It was on an October night in the first year of the war. After a battle which had filled the tem-

BIOGRAPHICAL

porary hospital, a country church, with wounded French and British soldiers, the Germans started an advance which necessitated the immediate removal of the wounded. All night Somerset Maugham worked with the ambulance unit. Some of the soldiers screamed with pain when they were moved, others died on the stretchers, and some were so obviously near death that no attempt was made to evacuate them. Among the latter was a French boy, who saw that men on both sides of him had been removed and that he was left to die. At the top of his voice he screamed, "*Je ne veux pas mourir! Je suis trop jeune! Je ne veux pas mourir!*" He continued to scream that he was too young to die until he died. Whenever Somerset Maugham has read or heard the theological and philosophical justifications of error and evil, the terror of the dying French boy, and the agony of a Lambeth slum child dying of meningitis have come to his mind. To him these two shattering scenes are a refutation of the most finely spun theories of theologian and metaphysician.

Later on when the Government felt that his peculiar gifts would be of greater service elsewhere he joined the Intelligence Department. He enjoyed the new work, for the novelty of routine in the Red Cross Unit had worn off, and now he was to a large extent put on his own initiative. "The work

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

appealed both to my sense of romance and my sense of the ridiculous," and disillusion made it more ridiculous than romantic. Most of the day-by-day work was monotonous, much of it futile. And how art, in advance, had outstripped reality! No writer would dare use the hackneyed plot of the beautiful woman spy extracting valuable papers from a fascinated male, yet that very thing actually happened again and again. It was like finding a modern detective in the costume we associate with Sherlock Holmes. Somerset Maugham had excellent qualifications for the work: He was shrewd and intelligent, his native shyness served to make him inconspicuous, and his vocation, professional play and novel writing, afforded a useful screen for his activities. He spent a year in Switzerland, technically violating Swiss neutrality, and in constant danger of imprisonment. Life in Switzerland, particularly in Geneva, during the war was fantastic and serio-comic. There were spies everywhere—German, Austrian, Russian, French, British, even Turkish. Every hotel had its quota, who spent money freely. Everyone was suspicious of everyone else, and Swiss authorities jealous of Swiss neutrality (but not unaware of the economic blessings of that neutrality) were suspicious of all. Secret Agent Maugham lived in a Geneva hotel, pursued his profession as a writer, and performed the often inexplicable duties required of

BIOGRAPHICAL

him by the Intelligence Department. He was forced to make many journeys on the Lake of Geneva, delivering and receiving messages from agents at French ports on the Lake, and because of exposure in a rather severe winter his health broke.

The relative simplicity of his life had afforded him much time for writing, and he studiously left his manuscripts accessible in his rooms, aware that Swiss police ransacked his papers during his absences. He wrote the plays *Caroline, Home and Beauty*, *Our Betters*, and a novel, *The Moon and Sixpence*, during the war. But the nature of his illness, the hereditary scourge of tuberculosis, brought this uneasy year to an end—uneasy because the menace of imprisonment was increasing. In 1917 he visited the United States, ostensibly to oversee the production of *Caroline* in New York (produced in London in 1916); if “official” business occasioned this journey, the exact reasons are safely buried in the Archives of the Intelligence Department.

Before he returned to Europe, he realised an ambition that had never left him since as a boy and young man he had read the romances of Robert Louis Stevenson—a visit to the South Seas. It was war-time and for several reasons he could not make a prolonged stay. But the journey had a great effect upon him. It helped him recover his peace of mind, which at that time was shaken not only by the

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

sinister recurrence of tuberculosis but by other misfortunes as well. It provided him (a realist) with new notions of beauty and romance, and an entirely new concept of culture. He saw that the European pattern of life was only one of many patterns, that men were happy and vital although subject to an entirely different set of conventions from those of Europeans. He filled a notebook and returned to the United States improved in health, but not cured.

Then he was sent on an absurd mission to Russia, dangerous to him because of his health, and doomed to failure. It is difficult to believe that European and American statesmen were too obtuse to realise the inevitability of the Russian revolution, but extraordinary efforts were made by agents of the Allies to keep Russia at war with Germany and to prevent the formation of a Bolshevik Government. In spite of his illness he could not refuse an opportunity to visit the native country of Chekhov and Dostoievski. Although ordinarily a modest man, Mr. Maugham has said that if he had been sent to Russia six months earlier he might have succeeded! He returned to England in wretched health, disgusted with the Russians, who seemed to him hopelessly incompetent and undependable. Never had the "clarity, good sense, and personal dignity" of the French seemed so precious to him. It was incon-

BIOGRAPHICAL

venient, almost impossible, to seek to recover his health at St. Moritz or Davos; so he went to a sanatorium in Nordroch-on-Dee, Scotland, where he lived a semi-outdoor life until the last symptoms of his disease disappeared. He enjoyed his illness. After the hysteria of the war years he relished privacy, silence, leisure, and seemingly endless time to write, read, and imagine. "It was a very pleasant life at Nordroch-on-Dee. I was sent to bed every day at six o'clock, and an early dinner gave me a long evening to myself. The cold, windless night entered the room through the wide-open windows, and with mittens on my hands so that I could comfortably hold a pen, it was an admirable opportunity to write a farce." He wrote his most diverting farce, *Home and Beauty*. In the sanatorium he also learned more about his fellow men, or more strictly speaking, realised more acutely that he could never know much about them, except that human nature is unaccountable.



IN JANUARY 1918 the second new play by Somerset Maugham, to be performed during the war, was produced. *Love in a Cottage* is an unconvincing problem comedy, and merited the public indiffer-

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

ence with which it was received. The next year, 1919, was his most successful since his sensational début as a popular dramatist: he had two successes in the theatre, *Caesar's Wife* and *Home and Beauty*, and a "best-selling" novel, *The Moon and Sixpence*. The two plays are already "dated" in spite of their excellence (they illustrate the truth of his own contention that prose drama is an ephemeral art), but the novel has not lost in stature. *The Moon and Sixpence* had an enthusiastic reception by English and American critics, and unexpectedly became a best-seller. William Heinemann and George H. Doran had recognised the worth of *Of Human Bondage* and were proud to publish Somerset Maugham's books even though they might not have an extensive sale. George H. Doran has written that if he were given freedom of choice as to that book which he would first choose to have written, had he the genius and wit, it would be *Of Human Bondage*. *The Moon and Sixpence*, a fragmentary, tragic novel suggested by the life of the post-impressionist painter Paul Gauguin, was published with pride but not with great expectations. In America alone it sold 100,000 copies in the first six months following its publication. It drew attention to *Of Human Bondage*, which had been neglected, and to such early novels as *Liza of Lambeth* and *Mrs. Craddock*. For the first time since 1907 he

BIOGRAPHICAL

was better known as a novelist than as a dramatist. Although he was to write nine more plays, his interest in the drama gradually diminished until in 1933 he announced that he would write no more for the stage.

Since the war Somerset Maugham has devoted much time to travel and has drawn upon his Eastern notebook for material for two of his three novels, and for most of his short stories, but for only two plays. To make assurance doubly sure, for the sake of his health he journeyed again to China and the South Seas after his release from the sanatorium. During the next few years a restlessness drew him to all parts of the world; often he returned to England to attend to personal affairs and sort out his voluminous notes, then set out again to some other distant spot. Although an epicurean and lover of comfort, as a traveller he good-humouredly adjusts himself to the food, beds, and means of transportation of the country he is visiting. He has remarked that much of the charm of travelling is lost to him because he is at home wherever he goes. He is not amused by women's headdress in Scheveningen or St. Brieux or by different notions of courtesy and comfort. He accepts these details of life as entirely natural. He has no eye for the merely picturesque and is no sightseer. Always his prime interest is human nature, and he has become very sensitive to

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

personality and oddity of character. On his travels, anecdotes he heard that turn on unexpected or inexplicable behaviour found their way to his notebook. Sometimes a story he heard in the smoking room of a liner, or in a club or a private home would serve as the basis for a narrative, and result in embarrassment and indignation among those who felt themselves used as models. As a consequence Somerset Maugham is personally unpopular among British Colonials in some Eastern cities, where the alleged originals of some of his characters have undergone uncomfortable publicity.



WHEN he first came to London as a student he had rooms in Lambeth, near St. Thomas's Hospital. After he was qualified and had elected writing as his profession, he moved across the river to Westminster (more respectable than Lambeth) and lived for a number of years at Carlisle Mansions between Victoria and Buckingham Palace. He uses this section of London as the setting for the early scenes of *The Moon and Sixpence* and for part of *Cakes and Ale*. After his financial success in 1908 he moved to Mayfair, and at various times occupied an apartment or a house in Dover Street, Mount Street, Chester-

BIOGRAPHICAL

field Street, Wyndham Place, Half-Moon Street, and Bryanston Square. In 1915 he married Syrie, the former wife of Henry Solomon Wellcome (later Sir Henry Wellcome), the celebrated founder of many research laboratories and museums. Mrs. Maugham is the daughter of Dr. Thomas John Barnardo, a well-known physician and philanthropist and founder of the Barnardo Homes for children. A daughter, Lisa, is the only child of the Somerset Maughams.

His curiosity and restlessness, which dictated his moves about London as well as his long journeys, finally began to abate. After seven long journeys he discovered that he was no longer meeting new types, and he lost some of his interest in travel. He realised that travel, however, had already changed him. It had enabled him to win back his individuality, which he feared had become blurred by the conventions and pressures of Mayfair society. In 1928 he acquired a house in the land where he feels most at home—France. “Villa Mauresque,” at Cap Ferrat in the Alpes Maritimes, to the outsider is more of a show place than a home, but to Mr. Maugham and his friends the old Moorish Chateau on the French Riviera is a home of luxurious comfort and intimate charm. Does any private house in the world have such a peerless setting? It is on the lovely French Riviera, which advertising can not wither nor English

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

trippers stale, with the majestic Alps at the backdoor and the Mediterranean at the front. The garden is luxuriant, but it is not a tropical botanical museum. On the villa is a penthouse which the author uses as a study, and from the windows of which he can look towards Monte Carlo on the east, Nice on the west, the sea on the south, and the mountains on the north. One wonders that he ever travels at all! But the urge to travel, although lessened, is still powerful, and he journeys now and again to England, the Tyrol, America, the West Indies, Vienna. "Villa Mauresque," for all Somerset Maugham's protestations of unsociability, is a gathering place for interesting people from all over the world. The owner's hospitality is famous.

In 1920 *The Unknown*, a very bold play, was produced and it scandalised and shocked a great many people. It was a forthright expression of a general religious pessimism begotten by war—the great religious revival to be engendered by the war seems to have flourished most vigorously in the wishful thinking of ecclesiastics. In 1921 came a play as bold as *The Unknown*, but less shocking, as it did not deal with religious belief. *The Circle* has been widely admired and often acted, and since its first appearance has been generously accepted as a model of modern high comedy. Also in 1921 was published

BIOGRAPHICAL

his first collection of short stories since *Orientations* (1899). Four years after his first trip to the South Seas he wrote "Miss Thompson," to be renamed later "Rain." It was refused by many magazine editors before it found publication. After he had written five more long stories, all with a Pacific setting, he published them in a collection called The Trembling of a Leaf. The success of the collection was such that there was no longer a possibility of his receiving a rejection slip. He grew to like the form of the short story. It responded effectively to his particular talent, to his love of simplicity, lucidity, compression.

In 1922 he published *On a Chinese Screen*, his second volume of travel sketches—*The Land of the Blessed Virgin* was the first. *On a Chinese Screen* is marked by a greater purity of style and a deeper sense of beauty than the author had hitherto exhibited. In 1923 he produced in London *Our Betters*, which he had written during the war and which had already been performed in New York. More than anything else he has written, *Our Betters* has drawn down upon him the opprobrious epithet "cynical." In spite of its cynicism, Our Betters was his most successful play, and its long run indicates how much the temper of the post-war audiences differed from that of the pre-war audiences. In 1924 the hand of the playwright slipped—let *The Camel's*

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

Back rest in the oblivion to which author and public consigned it. In 1925 appeared his first novel in six years, *The Painted Veil*. It had already appeared as a magazine serial, and the publishers had escaped a lawsuit only by having the author change certain proper names. In 1926 a second collection of short stories, with the far East as setting, was published and repeated the success of its predecessor. *The Casuarina Tree* contains six stories, the best known of which is "The Letter." "The Letter" enjoyed a *succès de scandale* in the East, as it was alleged that Leslie Crosby was drawn from life and that her scandalous history did not vary considerably from fact. The author dramatized this story with success in 1927. Then for three years he drew upon his European notebooks.

In 1927 he produced *The Constant Wife*, a witty comedy in the direct tradition of Sheridan and Wilde. Since *Caroline* (1916) the tang of wormwood in the comedies had been growing more and more pronounced. In *Home and Beauty* (1919) we laugh at, not comfortably with, human folly; the laughter, especially at the end, of *The Circle* is from the wrong side of the mouth; in *Our Betters* we extract whatever mordant humour we can from the retchy intrigues of thoroughly revolting people; *The Constant Wife* makes wry comedy out of the

BIOGRAPHICAL

"double standard," which few European or American males really disbelieve in.

Then came a book that had been twelve years on his mind, *Ashenden*. It was inconceivable that he should not write of the war, for he has always written his own experiences into his books. (He has said that he would never write his autobiography since he has already used up all the events of his life in his plays and fiction.) *Ashenden*, of course, is not a history of his actual adventures in the service of the Intelligence Department; it is a collection of stories "founded on my experiences in the Intelligence Department during the war, but rearranged for the purposes of fiction." Perhaps the immediate impetus of the book was the extraordinary service Mr. Maugham engaged in during the General Strike in 1927, when he worked as a "sleuth" for Scotland Yard. Again he came face to face with the drama of conspiracy and intrigue and was reminded of the unused material in his war notebooks. *Ashenden* is an unusual blending of convincing realism, humour, and tense excitement.



WITH *Our Betters*, *The Circle*, and *The Constant Wife* he concluded the series of brilliant comedies of

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

manners he had planned, and felt that the play-writing design in his pattern was almost completed. He also shrewdly noted that fashions in plays were changing, and that he must either make concessions to the new taste or be laid on the shelf like Sir Arthur Pinero and Henry Arthur Jones, who outlived their popularity and were banished from the commercial theatre. More and more he enjoyed writing fiction; he preferred the liberty of the prose tale to the rigid conventions of drama; and he was conscious of improvement in his style and technique in fiction, whereas he reached a final plateau in playwriting. He had in his head, however, four more plays which he wished to write. He had no hope of their public success, but he wanted to write them to fill out the pattern, and was indifferent to their subsequent history. He knew that audiences would not be charmed and flattered by them, but shocked and pained. He wrote the four plays in the order in which he thought they would be increasingly unsuccessful.

The Sacred Flame (1929) was surprisingly popular in spite of the deliberately literary style, and the theme, "mercy killing," was accepted sympathetically. *The Sacred Flame* has become a favourite with the bolder amateur and Little Theatre organizations. *The Breadwinner* (1930) enjoyed a long run in London partly because it had novelty (a new

BIOGRAPHICAL

twist to the *Doll's House* plot) and partly because the comedy elements were stressed. It failed promptly in New York, chiefly because of wretched production and acting. *For Services Rendered* (1932), an unrelieved and ironical tragedy, was by no means a failure and received excellent press notices. Somerset Maugham's last play, *Sheppey* (1933), shows no falling off in his skill as a dramatist. It is a strangely moving play, and the final scene provides effective alleviation (as in Elizabethan drama) to the tragedy. Although *Sheppey* has not been produced in America, it has already found a place in the repertory theatres of the Continent. As far as his self-respect, critical opinion, and general reputation are concerned, he was perhaps wise in abandoning the theatre while his skill as a dramatist was at high tide.

In 1930 appeared his third novel since the war, *Cakes and Ale*, and his first humorous book (excluding plays) since *The Bishop's Apron* in 1906. For a humorist, his output of droll and pleasant books is remarkably slight. At first *Cakes and Ale* was not accepted as a humorous story, but as an execrable attack on the reputation of Thomas Hardy, who had recently died. Somerset Maugham accepted with amusement and composure the virulent attacks made upon him. Whether they were warranted or not, one reads the book now with

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

considerable diversion; and the years that have elapsed since the death of the great Victorian novelist have already made him too shadowy to serve unequivocally as a model for Edward Driffeld. In 1930 appeared the best of his non-fiction books, and the book he most enjoyed writing, *The Gentleman in the Parlour*, an account of an Asiatic journey. It is less fragmentary than *On a Chinese Screen*, more suave, adult, and philosophical than *The Land of the Blessed Virgin*. He is less enthusiastic and more sceptical than in 1905 (when he wrote *The Land of the Blessed Virgin*), but he has achieved a near-perfection in pure style, and has grown in sensitivity to beauty, that is, in spiritual stature. *Cakes and Ale* and *The Gentleman in the Parlour* brought him general recognition as one of the great English stylists.

In 1931 he returned to the English scene in *The First Person Singular*, which contains some of his best stories. Somerset Maugham is a master of the brief story (as in *Cosmopolitans*) and also of the longer tale, a form long cultivated in France and Germany. The scenes of the stories in *The First Person Singular* are the seaside towns, or London drawing rooms and flats. There are two stories of exquisite, bland humour, "Jane" and "The Creative Impulse." These stories give further proof of the author's versatility. In 1932 was published one of his

BIOGRAPHICAL

most gripping novels, *The Narrow Corner*. Again he uses the South Seas as a setting and European settlers and derelicts as characters. Many younger critics enamoured of the technical experiments and verbal eccentricities in modern novels, were suspicious of *The Narrow Corner*, which was obviously written according to an old-fashioned standard. It was merely a good story, clearly and excellently told. It was like a *Selbstbild* by Rembrandt at a surrealist exhibition. For his next book, *Ah King* (1933), he also drew upon his oriental notebook and produced a collection of stories of the type now definitely associated with him; stories of maladjusted Europeans in the East.

Somerset Maugham's youthful love of Spain has never burnt itself out. *The Land of the Blessed Virgin* did not suffice to free him of old memories that continued to haunt him; and the intervening years brought him a rich acquaintance with Spanish art, character, religion, and literature that had deepened and mellowed the old infatuation. *Don Fernando* (1935), a rambling discursive book on Spain of the Renaissance, was entirely a labour of love. The author knew that few readers would follow him with absorbing interest on by-paths that had long beckoned to him. Had he wished to do so, he could have expanded any one of the stories in *Ah King* or *Cosmopolitans* into a novel which would have

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

attracted a hundred thousand readers; but *Don Fernando* had to be written: it was a part of the pattern that could not be omitted. It is one of the most civilised of books.

After reading *On a Chinese Screen*, Ray Long, editor of the *Cosmopolitan* magazine asked Mr. Maugham to write a series of stories sufficiently brief to be printed on one page, or two adjacent pages, of the magazine. From his travel notebook he easily found enough suggestions to fill the order. In 1936 these stories were collected and published under the title *Cosmopolitans*. They are brief, pointed, carefully designed, and entertaining. Authors who painfully and slowly gather incidents and characters together to form a plot must look aghast at Mr. Maugham's extravagance: the meat of nearly any one of the stories in *Cosmopolitans* would be another man's novel. But he has always had in his mind and notes far more plots than he could ever use. He can afford to be prodigal and to lavish the stuff of a novel in a brief yarn such as "A Friend in Need."

BIOGRAPHICAL



WHEN in the autumn of 1935 Somerset Maugham travelled to New York on his way to the West Indies and California for the winter, he had with him the manuscript of the last of the books which, as he phrases it, had to be written. It was *The Summing Up*, not an autobiography or a book of recollections (and what a book of recollections he could write, for he has known most of the celebrated European and American writers, many of the great artists and statesmen of the past forty years), but, as the title implies, a summing up of ideas and thoughts and philosophy of life. He remarks that the obituary columns of the *Times* impressed upon him the fact that the sixties are particularly unhealthy and that it would exasperate him to die before he had written this book. This book, he maintains, is a further demonstration of the truth that an author is oppressed by certain ideas or memories until he writes them into a book and thus discharges them from his mind. It was the theory also back of his last four plays, *Don Fernando*, and *Of Human Bondage*. *The Summing Up* completes the pattern of his life as far as writing is concerned.

In the preface to *Cosmopolitans* he writes, "I have

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

a natural predilection for completeness." As he has thrust design on his stories in the manner of de Maupassant, rather than a fluttery casualness in the manner of Chekhov, so he has succeeded in imposing a design on his career as a writer. With *The Summing Up* this design is completed. He enjoys life and his work, as philosophical pessimists almost invariably do, and plans to continue writing. But nothing he will write in the future will, he declares, alter the pattern; it is complete, and an addition here or extension there will not alter its essential design. Like his great novel, *The Summing Up* is the record of his spiritual progress from mental bondage to gratifying and sometimes exhilarating pessimism. In addition, it sums up his various literary theories. There is little in the book that is new for the reader already well acquainted with Mr. Maugham's books and prefaces, for he has always written sincerely and held nothing back. It is exactly what he calls it, a summing up.

In 1937 was published his first novel in five years, *Theatre*, a popular success but disappointing to admirers of *Mrs. Craddock*, *Of Human Bondage*, and *Cakes and Ale*. Critics at once pointed out the aptness of the title, for this comedy of disagreeable people is superficial and theatrical from beginning to end. Ten years earlier he probably would have used the characters of *Theatre* and their somewhat tire-

BIOGRAPHICAL

some amorous adventures in a flashing, artificial comedy like *Our Better*s or *The Constant Wife*; in fact, *Theatre* reads exactly like a novelisation of some brilliant comedy of manners of the early 1920's. It is an exercise of a skilful writer who knows that he can manufacture a readable, superficially neoteric story out of the most antiquated materials.



SOMERSET MAUGHAM is somewhat slight in stature and not distinguished in appearance. He does not possess the carefully groomed burliness of a Hugh Walpole, the commanding height and panache of an Arnold Bennett, or the defensive gruffness of a Rudyard Kipling. In dress he is neither foppish nor careless but somewhat casual in the manner of the well-dressed Englishman. His most distinctive feature is his eyes, which one may describe as Emerson described Thoreau's: terrible. They strip one relentlessly to the soul: subterfuge, affectation, insincerity are futile before their steely penetration. They do not suggest mystery, but wisdom and disillusion. At times there is a cruel glint in them; more often, however, there is a flash of amusement, for his philosophical pessimism leads him to find many things diverting which the optimist feels obliged to

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

regard solemnly. It is interesting to note that in a clever pencil portrait by the talented and wise caricaturist Low, who wished to present his subject in a characteristic mood, Maugham is laughing heartily.

To many of his friends Somerset Maugham's assertion that he is unsocial is puzzling. His hospitality at Villa Mauresque is famous. He has a wide acquaintance in the literary, artistic, and diplomatic circles in London, Paris, and New York. He moves as easily in "society" as did Robert Browning in his last years. Like a gentleman he hides his charity-light under a bushel, but he is sympathetic and generous. Many a young writer has profited from his advice and help. Although genuinely indifferent to publicity he is always courteous to journalists and never churlish with such minor pests as autograph-seekers. He is a sprightly and witty conversationalist, a gifted raconteur, and he enlivens his talk with considerable Gallic gesture. Moreover, he is a good listener. His talk reveals the sweep of his interests: art, philosophy, literature, national traits, eccentricities of human behavior; and it is racy with anecdote. Often his piquant comments on men and women, if not downright malicious, are at least peppery. The lords of this earth do not awe him.

In his sixties Somerset Maugham can regard his past with satisfaction, for he has succeeded to some extent in imposing a pattern of his own design on

BIOGRAPHICAL

his life: Self-realisation with an aesthetic aim, but tempered by a lively sense of irony. He can regard his future with serenity, for he meets it well armoured with health, philosophy, humour, skill at cards (which he considered a valuable weapon in fighting the tedium of old age), and a nimble mind. His life has been more interesting than adventuresome, more fortunate than happy. He has been afflicted with a speech defect, which his almost abnormal shyness has made distressing for him. He confesses that he has never experienced what is man's supreme felicity, requited love. His marriage to Syrie Barnardo was dissolved in 1927. The impermanence of human affections he accepts as a fact, philosophically. His marriage was a part of the pattern, and reached completion. When he gave away in marriage his only child, Lisa, in the summer of 1936, another section of the design was completed.

But his life has not been an unhappy one. Not even Somerset Maugham can be indifferent to success and praise. He has often known the great satisfaction of having done his best. Independence has brought him a gift of inestimable value: he has written books not to please others but to please himself. And as the gods are lavish with favours to those who do not demand them, the public has accepted many of these books with enthusiasm. Endowed

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

with intelligence and a predilection towards reality and honesty, he has constructed for himself a philosophy that brings him peace. His study of science made him a determinist; his study of the great philosophies and religions convinced him that Truth is non-existent, that life has no meaning. He received these conclusions with exultant relief. His philosophical pessimism has insulated him against the insanity of regret and the chagrin of disillusion, menaces, he believes, to the precarious happiness of the optimist. His study of the arts has not made him a mere aesthete but a critic of authority and a sensitive lover of beauty. His disbelief in man's altruism has made him more conscious and appreciative of human goodness whenever it manifests itself. Like Montesquieu he notes that great actions are easier and more common than good actions. He denies, with sly amusement, the charge that he is a cynic, inasmuch as he is constantly finding good in people condemned by society as bad.

It has been noted early in this sketch that when a young man, he made up his mind to get the most out of the one life allotted to him; to impose a plan on his life, in which writing would be important but not everything. His ambition has been realised. Writing has remained the essential element in his life, but he has lived a many-sided life and has remained, as Emerson phrases it, man writing, not a

BIOGRAPHICAL

mere writer. He was bilingual from childhood and because of his early years in France he has escaped a narrow patriotism and racial intolerance. The shifting events of his life have brought him into association with all types of men: the French and the Embassy playmates of his earliest years; the narrow and stupid uncle and his friends in Whitstable; the healthily cruel school-fellows and the incompetent masters at Canterbury; the intellectual life in Heidelberg, and his friends there who introduced him to aesthetics and scepticism; the fantastic interlude among the chartered accountants; his years at the medical school among scientists and the squalid poor; his association with publishers, writers, theatre-folk, and the dolorous intelligentsia; his vacations in Spain and Italy; his financial success and years in Mayfair society; his work with the Red Cross and Intelligence Department during the war; his abortive love affairs; his marriage and divorce; his travels to all parts of the world and observation of man in a hundred environments. He has acquired a great tolerance and with a Gallic shrug of the shoulders accepts life on its own terms. He approaches old age with troops of friends—and a fair-sized troop of enemies—honor, independence. His enthusiasm for golf, aquaplaning, tennis, motoring, bridge, and reading has not deserted him. And he has kept his own soul. He was not tempted by an incredible

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

offer from Hollywood. He recently received an official letter from the Soviet government reminding him of his popularity in Russia and asking for a statement of his political philosophy. The government offered to promote the sale of his books if he would confess to Soviet sympathies. He could afford to refuse. In the years ahead he plans to write books for his own amusement; he hopes that they may please readers as well. He has found a way of life that seems good. It is not a new discovery, for wise men have been telling us of it for thousands of years; but each must make the discovery for himself. Somerset Maugham likes the succinct statement by Fray Luis de Leon and brings to a close *The Summing Up* with these simple and wise words: "The beauty of life is nothing but this, that each should act in conformity with his nature and his business."

Part II

THE NOVELIST

ALTHOUGH Somerset Maugham has won his greatest distinction as a writer of fiction, for many years his principal interest was in the writing of drama. Failing to have any of his early plays accepted, he determined to establish a reputation as a novelist and then capitalize upon this reputation in the theatre. As a matter of fact, in spite of the incessant wailing over the decline of the theatre, an unknown dramatist of merit has today a much better opportunity of obtaining a hearing in the commercial theatre than had the beginner forty years ago. Somerset Maugham was to learn that good name in man or woman avails but little in the theatre; Wordsworth, Lamb, Tennyson, Stevenson, and Henry James are but a few of the many who had literary reputations but who failed to possess what Somerset Maugham terms the knack of writing plays. He tells us again and again in his plays that love is transient; in him, even the love of playwriting did not endure. It is

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

interesting to note that he has definitely stopped writing plays—he resolutely calls *Sheppey* (1933) his last play—but that his interest in fiction is unabated.

Attracted by the popularity of a series of short books called the Pseudonym Library being published by Fisher Unwin, the young medical student submitted two long stories to Unwin, who saw at once that they had merit. His letter of rejection made Somerset Maugham deliriously happy, for the publisher said he would be glad to read a novel if he had one. Of course he had none, but he began *A Lambeth Idyl* at once, drawing freely and relentlessly upon the life about him for his material. At this time he was in his fourth year at the medical school and was spending the required periods in medical, surgical, and obstetric work. For the obstetric certificate the student had to attend twenty confinements; Somerset Maugham attended sixty-three in three weeks. He tells of being awakened in the night by a hospital messenger: the messenger led him through the dark and silent streets of Lambeth, up stinking alleys and into sinister courts. He was taken to grim houses, on each floor of which a couple of families lived, and shown into a stuffy room in which two or three women were standing round the bed where the patient lay. The experiences of these crowded weeks were to be

THE NOVELIST

drawn upon again nearly twenty years later when he wrote *Of Human Bondage*.

Fortunately he at that time felt a great admiration for de Maupassant, and he imitated the great French story-teller's methods. He has always been grateful that he had as an example one who "had so great a gift for telling a story clearly, straightforwardly and effectively." He tried in *A Lambeth Idyl* (published under the title *Liza of Lambeth*) to be objective, to eschew the superfluous. Unwin accepted the novel, which was published in 1897, after a delay occasioned by the second Jubilee of Queen Victoria. The book received mixed reviews, created a slight stir, and had a fair sale, although the publisher's cautious terms limited the author's royalties to less than twenty-five pounds. *Liza of Lambeth* was not a failure; it has had a persistent body of admirers and was reissued in England eleven times between 1897 and 1934. Best of all, it determined for him that his profession was to be literature.

Liza of Lambeth is an excellent first novel and well deserves the acclaim it at once received from discriminating critics and the place it holds in the affections of its author. Auguste Filon wrote a warm appreciation for *Le Journal des Débats*, and it was the subject one Sunday evening of a sermon at Westminster Abbey. But not all reviews were favorable. In these last years of the Victorian period the na-

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

turalistic novel in English was having a bitter struggle. George Moore was anathema to the respectable; Arthur Morrison and George Gissing were all but ignored; Thomas Hardy admitted defeat almost at the very moment *Liza of Lambeth* appeared, and wrote no more novels after the outcry against *Jude the Obscure*. A typical review is that of the *Athenaeum*, which admonishes that "readers who prefer not to be brought into contact with some of the ugliest words and phrases in the language should be warned that Mr. Maugham's book is not for them . . . *Liza of Lambeth* is emphatically unpleasing as literature." The most offensive of these words was "belly," which was changed by the publisher to "stomach" in the second impression. The book was not so downright shocking and harrowing like the French prototypes and *Jude the Obscure*, but vaguely disquieting. It was one of the first English novels to treat the slums realistically and objectively. Victorian novel readers preferred a sentimental attitude toward poverty, a fixing of the blame, the condemnation or approval of conduct. In *Liza of Lambeth* there is none of this. It is an unvarnished account of the last year in the life of a young factory-worker, her emergence from girl to woman, her brief but happy love affair, her catastrophic end. The slums are the background, but do not constitute the villain as in the work of later social propagandists. The

THE NOVELIST

half dozen characters are presented with ruthless precision and clarity, and we are not asked to condone or condemn. None of the characters are completely odious, none very admirable. These slum-dwellers are more primitive and naïve than their fellow-townersmen of the West End and obey their instincts more fully; at the same time they are involved in the complicated set of petty taboos and fantastic codes of honor of the bourgeoisie. But the novelist, like de Maupassant, is content to report; he does not judge.

Although the style of *Liza of Lambeth* lacks the easy flexibility, the deceptive carelessness of Somerset Maugham's later novels, and although at times one is too conscious of Flaubert and other models, the novel is almost a flawless masterpiece of its *genre*. There is nothing superfluous. Here is enough material for another *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* or *Esther Waters*, yet it is only half as long as either. It is entirely different in design from *Of Human Bondage*: it is built like a play with three or four interiors, as few exteriors, and a minimum of *dramatis personae*. It is in no sense a "sweeping" novel. There is some bitter humor, so unobtrusive that the unsuspecting reader may miss it; and there is the terrible, macabre humor of the last scene when Mrs. Kent, half-drunk, plans Liza's pretentious funeral and relates the fantastic details of Mr. Kent's demise.

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

The transpontine melodrama of the last century and the eating habits of the lower classes are amusingly described; there is a sarcastic reference to "this most glorious reign." For the most part, however, the narrative is unrelieved. There is no burlesquing of the Homeric street fight as in *Tom Jones*. There is no attempt to arouse pity for these slum-dwellers; they are not particularly unhappy or resentful of their surroundings. If they were, the novel would have more warmth, but such emotional relief would subtract from the novel's power.

Never has a book been more completely distilled from life. The medical student and slum doctor knew Mrs. Kemp, Liza and Jim, their street, their homes, their tastes, their narrow interests, their human weaknesses. For the author, like Philip Carey, was more than touched by all he met; he had the artist's eye and an understanding heart. In a way *Liza of Lambeth* is a period piece, with the current grotesque slang of the cockney, the amazing costume and coiffure of Liza, the innocent vulgarities of a Bank Holiday in the eighteen nineties. Modern society has condemned the slums, which are yielding to hygienic corporation flats, less colorful perhaps and certainly less odorous. But if the novel is a period piece, it is as vital as a Hogarth drawing; and if one sits in the out-patients' waiting room at St. Thomas's he will discover that there are today

THE NOVELIST

in Lambeth people very like the Blakestons and Kemps.



No AUTHOR has discussed his writing with more engaging frankness than has Somerset Maugham. In prefaces, letters, and interviews, and in *The Summing Up* he has told us of sources and methods and has shrewdly judged his own work. Perhaps he has estimated it too modestly, for it may be true, as he himself tells us, that others are inclined to accept our own self-appraisals. He has been an impartial critic of his own work. He admits that certain books were written hurriedly for the sole purpose of making money; that some treat serious subjects insincerely; that others were written with a calculating eye on the reading public. He does not think highly enough of a half dozen of these early novels to include them in the collected edition of his works. It is to be noted that all his fiction written after 1908, when he had made himself financially independent with his plays, is included in the collected works. After that date he wrote as he pleased and no longer had to manufacture pot-boilers. In recent years he has repeatedly stated that an author has a right to be judged by his best work; and it is true that we judge

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

Shakespeare by *Othello* and not by *Timon of Athens*, Ibsen by *Hedda Gabler* and not by *Cataline*. But Somerset Maugham has become a great figure in contemporary literature, and lovers of his books turn with interest to these culls from the early novels, not to "judge" the author but to complete their acquaintance with him.

He tells us that at about the time he was writing *Liza of Lambeth* he read some articles by Andrew Lang on the art of the novelist, and that he was much struck by one in which Lang advised the would-be novelist not to write about his own day and the life about him. But in *Liza of Lambeth* he had done that very thing! He determined to follow Lang's advice and make his second book a historical novel. Capitalizing upon his current interest in the Italian Renaissance and Italian literature, he seized upon the story of Caterina Sporza and the siege of Forli as excellent material. In his spare time from hospital work he read and took notes at the British Museum on the subject. His summer vacation he spent at Capri, where he wrote the novel *The Making of a Saint*. "It was my second book. The critics received it with coolness and the public with indifference."

The Making of a Saint, published in 1898, heralds the author's versatility. He wrote no second novel about the slums; he wrote no second historical novel.

THE NOVELIST

The Making of a Saint, although inferior to *Liza of Lambeth*, presages more accurately the subsequent work of the author. Robert Louis Stevenson had inaugurated a revival of the romantic novel, and on the surface *The Making of a Saint* would seem to be a contribution to a current popular literary form. But Somerset Maugham could never write a romance. He has always possessed a sturdy sense of humor and a respect for fact that deflate romance. Here is a novel full of the dazzling color and excitement of the Italian Renaissance, hair-breadth escapes, violent atrocities, fighting, bold love affairs. But one is always conscious that the author is writing with his tongue in his cheek. His cynical observations on the mob, the rulers, and the general frailty of mankind do not become a romanticist.

Here is a historical novel with an ending which is not pathetic but bitterly unhappy; the last pages are dark with disillusion and pessimism. The style is vigorous, the dialogue nineteenth century in flavor, and the story rapid and racy. The failure of the novel can be attributed only to the fact that he was writing for a public which did not exist in 1898. They could not or would not understand the ethical eccentricities of the hero, or stomach the cynical conclusion to the narrative.

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM



IN 1899 Somerset Maugham published his first collection of short stories, *Orientations*. His third published novel was *The Hero* (1901), which was written, however, after *Mrs. Craddock*. It is queer that *The Hero* did not attract more attention than it did, for it abounds in those characteristic qualities that were to make *The Moon and Sixpence* one of the most widely discussed books of 1919. In spite of good reviews, *The Hero* attracted few readers, and has never been reissued. Thirty-three years after its publication the author confessed that it was suggested by the Boer War and influenced by his study of the French novelists. It is justifiable to assume also that *The Hero* is a protest against the popular Kipling heroics and the patriotic nonsense written of a war not entirely creditable. The author also confessed that he had never read it since he corrected the proofs—"I have an almost unconquerable distaste for opening one of my books once it has been written." Perhaps that is why his judgment of the book is unsound: "It was grim and uncompromising and I should think very dull . . . I remember that my admiration for Flaubert led me to write long descriptions of scenery."

THE NOVELIST

As a matter of fact, *The Hero* is not grim—there are many passages of rich humor—and there are no long descriptions of scenery. It is the story of James Parsons, who has been reared in a narrow, Puritanical environment and stuffed with inflexible notions of right and duty, and who because of his war experiences is shaken into a knowledge of life and into doubts that unfit him for the society of the Kentish village to which he returns. Here is the eternal conflict between the old and the new, tolerance and intolerance, religion and scepticism. There is a determined questioning of the ancient clichés of morality, patriotism, family love, and duty. The author abandons the detachment of *Liza of Lambeth* and addresses the reader in many Thackerayan asides, thinly disguised as musings of the protagonist. Much of the interest of the book arises from the persistent shocking of the simple villagers; one easily guesses that the young author was more interested in the hero's iconoclasm than in the characters. For that reason the book really never becomes alive, for the characters do not live. The hero is a collection of rebellious opinions; the vicar and his wife almost Dickensian caricatures; the parents and fiancée shadowy and ineffectual opponents of the emancipated hero. And the hero is not always fair in his dueling.

There is rich, if somewhat cynical, humor in the

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

false heartiness of the parson; the self-righteous surveillance of the community by his wife; the hilariously funny welcoming speech for the hero; the sly thrusts at pre-war snobbishness, Marie Corelli and her admirers, the confounding of virtue with prigishness, the Chocolate Soldier sort of bravery. Many passages, however, must have pained the reader of 1901, and the suicide of the hero to escape marriage with the pious Mary brings the novel to a tragic end which is grotesque rather than moving. The book is more than readable for students of Somerset Maugham's works, for here are rudiments of characters and ideas to appear in later books. Here are the characters of *The Unknown*, and Dorothy of *The Breadwinner*; and in the hero there is much of Philip Carey. Here are the phrases to appear again and again—"bitterly amused," "obtrusive friendliness," "horribly cruel in their loving kindness," "cursed with no particular depth of feeling," "how pitiless was their love."



A FAR better novel is *Mrs. Craddock*, which was published in 1902 although it was written before *The Hero*. The novel was declined by every London publisher of consequence, who feared its frank

THE NOVELIST

treatment of sex and feminine psychology. Finally William Heinemann reconsidered and consented to publish the novel if the author would remove certain shocking passages. When Mr. Maugham revised the novel in 1928 he examined the original manuscript to discover these indecorous parts but was unable to find them. What novel-reader could today? Unless we were humorless disciples of Lawrence and Joyce, however, we would hardly go as far as the author and brand the propriety of the book as almost painful, for *Mrs. Craddock* is distinguished by its candor and truthfulness. Among contemporary writers only George Moore had attempted such a searching analysis of a woman in love—and in hate. It is a bold study of a passionate, intellectual woman in love with a cold, selfish, and stupid boor who has an overpowering physical attraction for her. Her shameless pursuit of the male she desires is unsparingly described; no wonder editors in 1900 were scandalised! Bernard Shaw had not yet helped clear the way with *Man and Superman*, and Victorian notions of modesty and the ritual of courtship were almost unquestioned.

Here is an absorbing subject for a sincere novelist: both Bertha and Edward Craddock are fine animals and for a time the satisfaction of their physical desires brings them happiness. But in background, temperament, culture, sensitiveness, and education

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

they have nothing in common. Even had Craddock been as passionately responsive as Lady Chatterley's lover, Bertha after a time would have been revolted by his loutish manners and banal tastes. Never were two more mis-mated people; yet the book makes plausible their initial attraction to each other and skillfully describes the slow transformation of love into hate. (Does not Strindberg say that love is only hate inside out?) No perceptible change takes place in Edward, a monument of self-satisfaction and insensibility. Somerset Maugham has never drawn a more complete portrait than that of Edward Craddock. Almost a caricature of the middle-class Anglo-Saxon, he is unimaginative, narrowly patriotic, energetically a good fellow, conservative, virtuous. He has no doubts, no struggles; he is incapable of self-criticism or remorse. Ironically, he is the happiest of all Somerset Maugham's characters. With a characteristic touch of malice, the author makes him a product of his own school in Canterbury.

Although Edward Craddock is more unequivocally depicted, the novel is correctly named after Bertha Craddock, whose complex character, intellectual restlessness, and prodigious sensitiveness make her of more tantalizing interest. An aristocrat in rearing and tastes, she debases herself before this cloddish man of property during the high-tide of her love; when the love is at last frozen out com-

THE NOVELIST

pletely, she takes a masochistic delight in brooding over his brutishness and stupidity. The end of the book finds her completely out of love. Stamping out the last vestige of her love for him when she sees his body after the fatal accident and before the flattering ministrations of the embalmer, she jubilantly feels herself free. With composure she picks up the book she had been reading when her dead husband was brought home, and begins reading again. To a less extent than in *Liza of Lambeth* the author's treatment is objective. Many readers find Bertha a more sympathetic character than Edward, but as a matter of fact she is in her way as inelastic and intolerant as he. Perhaps because the detestable qualities of the protagonists are italicized, the novel lacks charm, although it possesses vigour and reality.

Of the minor characters Miss Ley is notable. Of all the novelist's women characters she and Rosie Driffield are regarded by the author with most affection. Drawn from life, she reappears in a biographical sketch in his Preface to *What A Life!* by Doris Arthur Jones. Here she is described as Mrs. George Steevens, an old woman "of gallant bearing, frank and plain of speech," having no patience with affectation and hypocrisy, generous, kind, hospitable. Miss Ley serves as a fly-wheel of common sense in the tumultuous lives of her friends. She expresses the novelist's comments like the ancient chorus, or

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

the *raisonneur* in a comedy by Henry Arthur Jones. Her temperate philosophy of "live and let live" is refreshing in the midst of so much Victorian busybodiness. She enjoys shocking the prude and scandalising the narrow-minded, but she is sincere, not flippant, and her cynicism does not conceal her kindness of heart and warm tolerance. She appears also in *The Merry-go-Round* and is certainly the model for Lady Sophia of *The Bishop's Apron*.

Of the other minor characters, the nervous vicar and his energetic sister belong to the rather large comic gallery of Somerset Maugham's clerical characters. Miss Glover devotes her life to doing good, whether the victims of her implacable zeal desire it or not. Miss Ley declares that Miss Glover is fit only for Heaven; she pictures her "with her colourless hair hanging down her back, wings and a golden harp, singing hymns in a squeaky voice, morning, noon and night."



IN 1904 appeared Somerset Maugham's extraordinary novel *The Merry-go-Round*, which was a failure and which is known to few readers. The author today refers to it as an experiment, as it was for him; but it was no novelty in the history of prose

THE NOVELIST

fiction. He says, "It had struck me for some time that the novelist's usual practice of taking two or three persons and treating them as though the world moved round them, bringing in others only in so far as the protagonists were concerned with them, gave a very false impression of the multifariousness of life . . . the novelist writes as though his hero and heroine dwelt in a vacuum. I thought I could give a much fuller effect of life by taking a number of people, loosely connected . . . and giving all their stories with equal fullness . . . I chose the necessary number of persons and devised four series of events that occurred simultaneously." The same thing had been done by Dickens, Thackeray, and the great Russian novelists. One is surprised that Mr. Maugham hails it as an experiment. Curiously enough, *The Merry-go-Round* fails to give a correct "impression of the multifariousness of life," whereas the more artistically unified *Of Human Bondage* succeeds.

The novel is far from uninteresting, but its chief attraction is that it serves as a source book for some of the author's later work. One of the four stories furnishes the plot of his play *A Man of Honour*; another for the play *Grace*. Much of the philosophy reappears in *Of Human Bondage* and many comments and epigrams are used in later plays. The unorthodox ethics of the characters and the succession of unrewarded virtues and unpunished misdemean-

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

ours are perhaps somewhat forced by the author, but they give an occasional sprightliness to the four painful love stories. If Somerset Maugham did not repeat himself so boldly, he would in *The Merry-go-Round* have used up a large portion of his total stock-in-trade; as Bernard Shaw expresses it, he would have burned down his house to roast his pig. But he has never been reluctant to use again and again characters, epigrams, and situations.



ALL this time Somerset Maugham's eye was on the theatre and he was tirelessly writing plays. In 1906 when success was still a year off, a bit discouraged and pressed for money, he took a rejected play, *Loaves and Fishes*, and made it into a novel. "With the story and dialogue to hand I could turn them out in a few weeks." *The Bishop's Apron* appeared in 1906 and was the author's most successful book to date. He does not think highly enough of it to have it preserved in the collected edition of his works, but it is not at all without charm and lively interest. With the possible exception of *Cakes and Ale* and *Theatre* it is his only humorous novel. It is more cheerful and sprightly than *Barchester Towers* or Huge Walpole's *The Cathedral*, which

THE NOVELIST

it to some extent resembles, but the fun is barbed with the author's peculiar cynicism. The story concerns a worldly, pompous, and ambitious bishop, a humbug, but comic and not detestable. The author's amusing contempt for the Church of England never hardens into bitterness. The bishop's sister, Lady Sophia, while she knits lets fall, not words of canny Scotch wisdom like Maggie Shand, but little darts of truth and iconoclasm which graze but do not puncture the bishop's magnificent egotism. Her favorite comment after an outpouring of the oracular or pompous is "Fiddlesticks!" Critics who profess to know more about bishops than does Somerset Maugham declare that Canon Spratte is a fantastic creation, an insult to the Church. Even if he is a creature of an impious imagination, he is vastly amusing. It is to be regretted that *The Bishop's Apron* is out of print.



IN 1908 was published *The Explorer*, also the novelization of a play. It was dedicated to "My Dear Mrs. G. W. Steevens," the beloved Miss Ley of real life. It is one of two books by Somerset Maugham which should be forgotten. The other is *The Magician*. Either would be a credit to the average nov-

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

elist, but the author is justified in asking us to forget them. He wrote *The Explorer* in a month, as he needed money, and a rejected play of the same title offered him easy material. He says of the novel, "The chief character was suggested by H. M. Stanley, whose exploits had long fascinated my young fancy, and the strong silent man, owing to Mr. Kipling's vogue, was then very much in the fashion." The central weakness lies in the hero's high-flown behavior, which even the author could not believe in. Canon Spratte appears in the novel, Mrs. Craddock is mentioned; there are suggestions of Oscar Wilde in the flippancies and repartee, and a defense of hedonism which is far more plausible than the defense of the hero's "quixotic behavior." One must admit, however, that for all its defects the novel is not uninteresting, and the average reader would not dream of putting it aside half-read as he would cheerfully dispose of *Daniel Deronda* or *The Golden Bowl*. Somerset Maugham is never downright dull, much to the irritation of some of his critics.



THE other novel which could be assigned to oblivion is *The Magician*. Like *The Explorer* it is readable, but only as a curiosity and not as a living story. It

THE NOVELIST

is the fantastic account of a magician and scientist who successfully creates human life in the laboratory—Paracelsian *homunculi*—but who callously murders his wife to insure the success of his experiment. *The Magician* reminds one of *Trilby*, *Le Peau de Chagrin*, and the fantasies of H. G. Wells, but Somerset Maugham's respect for truth and his ironic sense of humor unfit him for the horror story. *The Magician* attempts to fuse melodrama, fancy, and realism; there are passages of humor and much shrewd observation—but the elements do not fuse. The author is wise in wishing the novel to be forgotten—although a popular edition appeared in 1927, surely with the author's approval; nevertheless he wrote it with care and spent much time in research. The wizard himself was suggested to the author partly by the portrait of Allessandro del Borro in the Berlin Museum and partly by an acquaintance in Paris who practised what he believed to be the black art. The novelist read *Le Grand Arcane*, *Le Livre de Splendeurs*, and *Philosophie Occulte* by Éliphas Levi (Louis Constant). Like many other young writers at the turn of the century he fell under the spell of Joris Karl Huysmans—the first page of *The Magician* might well have been written by the author of *À Rebours*. He was attracted by Huysmans' Poe-like horror tales. But he shrewdly points out the fatal weakness of *The Magi-*

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

cian: "He [Huysmans] lived in craven terror of spells, charms and incantations. To me it was all moonshine. I did not believe a word of it. It was a game I was playing. A book written under these conditions can have no life in it." *The Magician* is as jarring among the novels of Somerset Maugham as *Dracula* would be among the collected works of John Galsworthy.



IN 1915 *Of Human Bondage*, Somerset Maugham's masterpiece, was published. It is one of the great English novels, certainly the greatest autobiographical novel since *The Way of All Flesh*. It has often been compared with *Tom Jones*, but Philip's adventures have little in common with the picaresque episodes in the life of Fielding's hero. Philip's most exciting adventures are those of the spirit; his is not a pilgrimage from obscurity to eminence, but a pilgrimage from illusion to reality, from human bondage to freedom of spirit. Philip Carey is Somerset Maugham's Hamlet, but not Everyman, as has been suggested, for not to every man are given the sensitiveness, the absorbing curiosity, the enormous capacity for happiness and misery, the bent toward truth and realism which were Philip Carey's.

THE NOVELIST

But his doubts, his sickly thought, his quest for the meaning of life are common to the Hamlets of the world. Few other twentieth century novels have appealed to so great a number of intelligent readers.

Of Human Bondage was first written in a much shorter form in 1897 and 1898, just after the completion of *Liza of Lambeth*, and was given the flamboyant title of *The Artistic Temperament of Stephen Carey*. It stopped when the hero was twenty-four (the novelist's age then) and it sent him to Rouen instead of Heidelberg. It was not published, partly because it was feared that the episode of Miss Wilkinson would be offensive to Mudie's patrons (Mudie's Library was the heavy censor of the period) and partly because the young author demanded a hundred pounds in advance royalties. But he could not get the book out of his mind, where it continued to grow. New experiences and emotions worked their way into it during the years of success in the theatre. Finally, just as Charles Strickland's pictures had to be painted, *Of Human Bondage* had to be written, and in 1912 he began writing the novel. In two years it was completed. He has said, "I was disconcerted at the unwieldy length to which it seemed to be extending, but I was not writing to please; I was writing to free myself of an intolerable obsession. I achieved the result I aimed at, for, after I had corrected the proofs, I

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

found all those ghosts were laid, and neither the people who played their parts in the story, nor the incidents in which they were concerned ever crossed my mind again." He has never reread the novel since 1915, and is now not at all sure what events in it really happened, what were imagined, and what were exercises in wish-fulfilment on the author's part.

Rejecting the first title of *Beauty from Ashes*, which he had discovered in Isaiah, he hit upon *Of Human Bondage* while reading Spinoza. The title was somewhat forbidding, especially for war-time. The novel was quietly received; the British reviews were temperate, and the sale was modest. It looked as though like most novels it would soon be forgotten. But America under the belligerent leadership of Theodore Dreiser came to the rescue and saved the novel from oblivion. Dreiser's review in the *New York Nation* was the trumpet call, and a small nucleus of intelligent readers began to praise and recommend the novel. The number of its admirers grew steadily but slowly until the popular success of *The Moon and Sixpence* four years later drew public attention to the earlier and greater novel. English readers in 1915 were not inclined to be enthusiastic over a grimly realistic and uncompromising novel. The *Athenaeum* review probably spoke for many readers: "Today when so many are

THE NOVELIST

teaching us tersely how to live and to die, it requires some little patience to wade through 500 pages describing the process as leisurely and none too adequately carried out by a member of the male sex in the Victorian era." Readers in August, 1915, were reading *Faith for the Firing Line*, *War Thoughts of an Optimist*, *War and the Gospel of Christ*, *The Immorality of Non-resistance*, *The Souls of the Brave*, numerous books about the allies, and novels by Ruby Ayres, Edgar Wallace, Grant Richards, R. W. Chambers, and H. Rider Haggard. The patriotic-religious jargon, both in prose and poetry, of Sir Oliver Lodge, was extravagantly praised, even by the *Times*.

Not all American reviews were favorable. Many condemned the book on social and moral grounds, for its lack of idealism, even for the protagonist's weakness. "Depressing," "unwholesome," "morbid," were used over and over. And not all British reviews were hostile. They were, for the most part, patronising. But none rang out in unequivocal praise as did Dreiser's, who began thus his eulogistic review in the *Nation*, in his characteristic lumbering style: "Sometimes in retrospect of a great book the mind falters, confused by the multitude and yet the harmony of the detail, the strangeness of the frettings, the brooding, musing intelligence that has foreseen, loved, created, elaborated, perfected, until, in this

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

middle ground which we call life, somewhere between nothing and nothing, a dream, a happy memory, a song, a benediction. In viewing it one finds nothing to criticize or to regret. The thing sings, has color. It has rapture. You wonder at the loving, patient care which has evolved it . . . a novel or biography or autobiography or social transcript of the utmost importance." Dreiser was of course wrong in considering *Of Human Bondage* a social transcript; at least nothing was further from the author's aim. Nor is it a biography. It is a novel, and only in a restricted sense an autobiography. It is without question a faithful spiritual autobiography of Somerset Maugham's early years, and obviously he has drawn upon his own observation and experience for many of the characters and incidents; but not all of Philip's experiences were the author's.

Few autobiographical novels have so piqued readers' curiosity in regard to the author and to the precise extent characters and events were drawn from life. We must accept as true the author's statement that the book was long writing in his mind, that Philip's experiences were sometimes the author's, sometimes those of acquaintances, sometimes a merging of actuality and imagination, and that he himself is not always able to distinguish between fact and fancy. We are justified, however, in accepting *Of Human Bondage* as a spiritual auto-

THE NOVELIST

biography of Somerset Maugham from childhood to the beginning of middle age. Philip's longings, miseries, humiliations, spiritual defeats and triumphs were the author's as he remembered them after the passage of years. Philip's progress from human bondage to a jubilant and exhilarating nihilism is Somerset Maugham's; the author's own philosophy of life as outlined in *The Summing Up* is practically that of Philip Carey.

Certain experiences and acquaintances of Philip's were drawn directly from the author's life: the death of both parents when he was a small boy; the unhappy years at the vicarage with a clergyman-uncle; the shy, sensitive boy at school, tormented by his fellow-pupils because of a physical defect (Philip is given a clubfoot instead of an impediment in speech); the religious experience of puberty; the pathetic episode of the unanswered prayer for healing; the uninspiring masters of the school; the period of rapid intellectual and aesthetic growth in Germany; the aesthete-friend at Heidelberg and his influence; the apprenticeship period at the chartered accountant's (much longer in the novel than in real life); the years at the medical school faithfully transcribed from life, St. Luke differing only in name from St. Thomas. After Philip's qualification actuality and fiction diverge sharply. Somerset Maugham devoted himself at once to writing, Philip to

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

the practice of medicine. In a tender mood at the end of the novel the author pictures the kind of wife he would like—he confesses that Sally is a wish-projection—young, sensible, healthy, energetic, un-intellectual and unromantic, and he prognosticates a successful marriage between her and the wearied Philip. The author, however, married the sophisticated daughter of a celebrated physician, a divorcee, a woman of elegance and taste. Of Mildred, one of the most tantalizing and despicable characters in all fiction, one is permitted to say only that she is not altogether a creature of the novelist's fancy.

Of Human Bondage belongs to the simple biographical type of novel, a type as old as the novel itself. It belongs in the great company of *Tom Jones*, *Tristram Shandy*, *Pendennis*, *David Copperfield*, *The Way of All Flesh*, and *Clayhanger*. It carries the hero through a series of events over a number of years, and for the most part avoids complexity of plot and intrigue; the narrative is simple, and the personality and character of the hero impose a measure of unity on the novel. There is no technical innovation in *Of Human Bondage*, no experimenting with novelties of technique. There is no tortuous relaying of the narrative conversationally, as in Conrad; there is no obscurity—one is tempted to say wilful and malicious obscurity—as in Virginia Woolf; there is no gibberish as in James Joyce; there

THE NOVELIST

is no verbal exhibitionism as in Meredith, Beverly Nichols, and Carl Van Vechten. Nevertheless, *Of Human Bondage* is a highly original book, for it is sharply distinguished from other novels by its sincerity. The book is almost painfully honest, both in the portrayal of character, and in the candid unfolding of Philip's adventures of the spirit.

There is no attempt to idealize the hero. Philip Carey is presented to us not only as he appears to himself, but as he appears to others. To them he is often rude, supersensitive, distrustful, proud, self-centred. It is the privilege of the novelist to reveal what is intrinsic and what is façade, what is characteristic and what is accidental. We learn to know Philip as we are able to know few people in fiction, fewer in life. He who seems to his uncle, masters, and acquaintances sullen and intractable has a tormenting desire for sympathy and affection, and at the same time he is harassed by an abnormal longing for self-torture. He has charm and power to excite affection in the few who can penetrate his envelope of assumed indifference, but, until near the end of the book when he is humbled and awed by a sense of human misery (like Lear), his taciturn manner alienates many whom he yearns to have like him. His uncle dislikes him, he is unpopular at school and in the accountant's office; but as he grows older and wiser, he accepts more readily men

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

as they are, and is not unpopular at St. Luke's or even in the draper's shop. He is the exact opposite of the thick-skinned, insensible Edward Craddock: Philip is impressionable, and is affected by every event he passes through and everyone he meets. He is not plastic and spineless, but he learns. He does not merely reflect experience, like the hero of the average biographical novel; he absorbs it. He wrings from life eventually a philosophy to sustain him, but only after a series of shattering disillusionments. He finds the religion of his youth to be false and useless. Instead of experiencing the delirium of love, he is led by Miss Wilkinson into a squalid and repulsive sex experience. The selfishness of the uncle, the hypocrisy of the vicars and masters, the brutality of his schoolmates, the selfishness and greed he discovers everywhere, the self-deception and affectation of his acquaintances in Paris might have led him to misanthropy. But they do not do so. Rather they lead him to a greater tolerance, a kind of clumsy affection and sympathy for mankind.

The other characters are intensely real and alive. Uncle William is mercilessly stripped—inordinately lazy, egotistic, selfish, he still remains human, and we view the horrible process of a Christian vicar's death with mingled pity and revulsion. There are the strange schoolmaster Tom Perkins, capriciously sympathetic and understanding, who overrides social

THE NOVELIST

handicaps and introduces new methods of pedagogy; and Philip's schoolfellow Rose, who cruelly rejects the adolescent's affection and hero-worship. Afterwards comes the circle of acquaintances at Heidelberg, who shake him into strange new notions of religion, ethics, and beauty: Weeks, the affable sceptic; his seedy tutors, Wharton and Ducroz; Hayward, the ineffectual aesthete, whose life was to come to such an astonishing end; Cäcilie, whose elopement with the Chinese student makes Philip aware of the inexplicability of human nature. Then follow the dull months in the office in Chancery Lane, when he associates with bounders and stolid plodders at uninspiring work. In Paris among artists and writers he sees human nature somewhat off-centre perhaps, but Clutton, Lawson, Flanegan, Cronshaw, and Miguel inform him and sharpen his curiosity. When he is at the Medical School the disloyalty of Griffiths shakes his faith in mankind, and the opportunism of Upjohn revolts him. In Thorpe Athelny and his family of eccentrics Philip again encounters human goodness. After the harrowing period of extreme poverty (a part of the novel almost intolerably painful to read) Philip is thrown with the uncultivated but not repellent assistants of Lynn's shop, who teach him how the other three-fourths live and what they think about. After the opportune death of his uncle, Philip returns to the medical

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

school, and as a clerk in the out-patients' department and as obstetric clerk, he sees men and women under the most distressing conditions of disease and poverty; a greater tenderness is born in him and a knowledge of man's capacity for goodness and his courage in the face of appalling disaster. What a stream of men touch him as they pass by him, in what a grim pageant of life they are fellow-performers with him!

The women in Philip's life, with one exception, have less influence upon him. His mother he can scarcely remember. Aunt Louisa is a pathetic nonentity, a slave to her exacting, lazy husband and to the fantastic inhibitions of the middle-class Victorians. She is a social snob, and her piety is ridiculous. But she is kind-hearted, and, with a jovial husband and a half dozen children, what a different woman she would have been! The simpering, affected Miss Wilkinson provides Philip's first sex-experience, which is without glamour, passion, or beauty. Fanny Price, unclean, starved in soul and body, falls a victim to her barren art-dreams; to Philip her suicide is a shocking catastrophe. Mildred belongs to a select gallery of unforgettable women in fiction along with Becky Sharpe, Anna Karenina, and Emma Bovary. Rarely have fancy and fact joined to effect such a monster. She is far more terrifying than Iago, that incredible link between

THE NOVELIST

the Vice of the morality play and the absolute villain of the melodrama; more terrifying than Hedda Gabler, a worthless neurotic who does not touch us because she touches no one in the play. But not only does the author tell us that Philip is in love with Mildred Rogers, emaciated and dyspeptic, vulgar and shabby of mind, odiously genteel; the miracle happens when this love is made credible. The reader agonizes with Philip, who is gentle, honest, and intelligent, but miserably a slave to a racking passion. Her very name is grotesquely common; Philip as well as the reader is aware of her thousand petty dishonesties, her pretentiousness and shallowness, her cockney notions of gentility and refinement, her incapacity for gratitude, and her insenitiveness to others' suffering; but although as much aware of her unworthiness as is the reader, Philip is helpless. It is proof of Somerset Maugham's genius that we do not question Philip's love for Mildred. With what obvious delight the author fills in the amazing portrait! Mildred horrifies us; we shudder when her name appears on a page, but she fascinates us at the same time. When she finally drifts out of the story, a diseased prostitute, we feel a tremendous relief, but at the same time a vague regret that we have done with this monstrous creature. The exquisite delight with which one reads the Mildred episodes in *Of Human Bondage* affords an excellent

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

example of the morbid pleasure man may obtain from the harrowing and painful.

Norah Nesbitt is unlike Mildred in every way. She is Philip's equal intellectually, possesses a sharp sense of humor, and is affectionate and kind. But Philip cannot love her. It is a favorite observation of the author that one falls in love where one falls in love, not where one wants to love; and that one falls out of love in the same involuntary way. Sally Athelny is different from both Mildred and Norah. She is sensible, unpretentious, quiet, unintellectual; she is a good animal and a good worker, and, unlike most of the women in Mr. Maugham's books, expects no fantastic rewards from life simply because she is beautiful and feminine. Philip believes that Sally will bring him what he yearns for above all things—affection and peace.

Almost equal in interest to the characterization and incidents of the novel is the painstaking revelation of Philip's spiritual struggles, doubts, search for truth and meaning, disillusionments, and final attainment of a philosophy of life that releases him from the most galling shackles of his human bondage. In common with many intelligent people Philip begins his search for truth with the painful business of divorcing philosophy and religion. A stubborn realist, he has no talent for mysticism and revelation, although he undergoes (under strong pressure) the

THE NOVELIST

emotional religious experiences of the normal child and adolescent. Life at the vicarage and in school fails to demonstrate for him any tangible advantages of Christian living. When his prayer for healing, in spite of a complete faith, is unanswered, he becomes confused. But he does not shed his Christian faith until he goes to Germany, debates with Weeks, and sees the world through other than Anglican glasses. He discovers that it is possible to be virtuous and unbelieving; that the nature of people's religion is dictated largely by geography. When he finally confesses to himself that he does not believe, he is exultant. "His heart leapt when he saw that he was free from all that." Faith had been forced upon him, and he ceases to believe because he does not have the religious temperament. "He was surprised at himself because he ceased to believe so easily, and, not knowing that he felt as he did on account of the subtle workings of his inmost nature, he ascribed the certainty that he had reached to his own cleverness."

Having shed the bonds of Christian theology, he is still far from absolved from the claims of idealism and the ingrained notions of sin and duty. Although not brought up to distinguish between truth and wishful thinking, "he had the unfortunate gift of seeing things as they were. He did not know how wide a country, arid and precipitous, must be

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

crossed before the traveller through life comes to an acceptance of reality. It is an illusion that youth is happy, an illusion of those who have lost it; but the young know that they are wretched, for they are full of the truthless ideals which have been instilled into them, and each time they come in contact with the real they are bruised and wounded. It looks as if they were the victims of a conspiracy; for the books they read, ideal by the necessity of selection, and the conversation of their elders, who look back upon the past through a rosy haze of forgetfulness, prepare them for an unreal life. They must discover for themselves that all they have read and all they have been told are lies, lies, lies; and each discovery is another nail driven into the body on the cross of life." His wretched intrigue with Miss Wilkinson and his devastating passion for Mildred disillusion him, for he sees that love can bring humiliation and misery. It is Cronshaw who accelerates Philip's quest for the answers by pointing out that absolute truth does not exist, by clarifying his concepts of right and wrong, by shattering his notion of sin, and, finally, by suggesting an answer to the great enigma of the why and wherefore of existence itself. His conversion to determinism frees him from the illusion of human liberty. Life teaches him that all is transient, even love, but that good and happiness are no less precious because they are transient.

THE NOVELIST

The spiritual crisis of his life comes during the extraordinary period when he is employed at Lynn's shop. Spending his hours among the vulgar and petty and common, he is rapidly becoming a misanthrope. One Saturday afternoon in the British Museum he sits before some Athenian tombstones of the fourth and fifth centuries before Christ. On each stone is the single tragic word "Farewell." For the first time Philip *feels* the inevitability of death and the poignancy of grief and separation. His heart is filled with compassion for man when he realises the futility of life, the meaninglessness of it all. "The rain fell alike on the just and upon the unjust, and for nothing was there a why and a wherefore." Years before, Cronshaw had given him a small Persian rug with the cryptic observation that it held the answer to the enigma. Suddenly as Philip sits before these monuments to universal grief, Cronshaw's meaning leaps into his mind. Life, like the erratic design on the carpet, has *no* meaning! As the beginning of life on this insignificant satellite of an insignificant speeding star was accidental, so will the end come inevitably; and neither beginning nor end has significance. "There was no meaning in life, and man by living served no end. It was immaterial whether he was born or not born, whether he lived or ceased to live. Life was insignificant and death without consequence." This realization does not de-

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

press Philip; on the contrary he exults at another weight lifted from his shoulders. ". . . it seemed to him that the last burden of responsibility was taken from him; and for the first time he was utterly free." He experiences a sense of increased power, for he feels himself equal with the malignant fate that has dogged him. The world is robbed of its cruelty since life is meaningless. Philip rejoices. "As the weaver elaborated his pattern for no end but the pleasure of his aesthetic sense, so might a man live his life, or if one was forced to believe that his actions were outside his choosing, so might a man look at his life that it made a pattern . . . It was merely something he did for his own pleasure . . . Philip thought that in throwing over the desire for happiness he was casting aside the last of his illusions. His life had seemed horrible when it was measured by its happiness, but now he seemed to gather strength as he realized that it might be measured by something else." In ceasing to crave happiness and in accepting life on its own terms, Philip becomes happy.

More than twenty years after writing *Of Human Bondage* Somerset Maugham outlines his own philosophy of life in *The Summing Up*. The years which have brought him success beyond most men's dreams have widened his tolerance, deepened his love of beauty, and mellowed his sense of humor.

THE NOVELIST

But his philosophy of life is practically that of Philip Carey's of a quarter of a century ago—the philosophy of acceptance, fearless recognition of things as they are, and rejection of the sham comforts of idealism and wishful thinking. Realism and what the world calls pessimism cannot go beyond this philosophy. But Somerset Maugham would have us believe that it has brought him satisfaction as it brings Philip happiness as its by-product. He can listen, often with amusement, to the tale told by an idiot, but he does not distress himself by trying to make it intelligible.



IN 1919, four years after the publication of *Of Human Bondage*, appeared the first of Somerset Maugham's novels to find a large public. *The Moon and Sixpence*, lacking practically all the elements of popular fiction, was, nevertheless, the most widely discussed novel of the year, and won for the author a large and enthusiastic body of readers which has remained loyal to him. *The Moon and Sixpence* would have been a valuable book had it served no other purpose than to call attention to *Of Human Bondage*; but it, too, is a masterpiece in its own right, though of smaller magnitude than its neg-

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

lected predecessor. It is perhaps worth mentioning that the last fourth of *The Moon and Sixpence* deals with Tahiti, and that his next four books have the South Seas or the Far East as their setting. These books consolidated the author's popularity.

The Moon and Sixpence was suggested by the life of the great French Post-impressionist painter, Paul Gauguin, but it is by no means a biography. There is a reference to Gauguin in *Of Human Bondage*. Clutton says to Philip,

"D'you remember my telling you about the chap I met in Brittany? I saw him the other day here. He's just off to Tahiti. He was broke to the world. He was a *brasseur d'affaires* . . . and he had a wife and family, and he was earning a large income. He chuck'd it all to become a painter. He just went off and settled down in Brittany and began to paint. He hadn't got any money and did the next best thing to starving."

"And what about his wife and family?" asked Philip.

"Oh, he dropped them. He left them to starve on their own account."

"It sounds a pretty low-down thing to do."

"Oh, my dear fellow, if you want to be a gentleman you must give up being an artist . . ."

Many lives of Gauguin have been written—by Barth, Chasse, Dorsenne, Fletcher, Becker, Morice, Rey, and Rotonchamp, and his intimate journals and

THE NOVELIST

letters have been published. Undoubtedly *The Moon and Sixpence* has augmented the interest in Gauguin's pictures and in his strange life, but the novel must be regarded simply as a work of fiction suggested by the fantastic career of the great artist. Although Charles Strickland was suggested by Gauguin, he unquestionably has traits of Cézanne, Rimbaud, and Van Gogh, and his artistic creed is not unlike that of El Greco. As a matter of fact, it is not without autobiographical significance. In the novel Charles Strickland, a successful stockbroker, suddenly throws up his business, callously deserts his wife and children, goes to Paris, and devotes himself to painting. Somerset Maugham has pointed out a far less dramatic parallel in his own life. After the publication of *Liza of Lambeth*, *The Making of a Saint*, *The Hero*, *Mrs. Craddock*, and *The Merry-go-Round*, and the performance of *A Man of Honour* by the Stage Society, the young author became a popular figure among the literary lion-hunters, whom he amusingly describes in *The Moon and Sixpence*. His books had attracted no general attention, but he was "promising" and was much coddled by hostesses who feel obliged to honor the arts when they make out their invitation lists. It was all very agreeable, but to the young bachelor it eventually seemed very dull and meaningless. He wearied of the endless luncheons, literary teas, week-

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

end visits, and Mayfair balls. He was growing old (he thought) and the precious years were slipping through his fingers. He had a great eagerness for life. He determined to cut himself adrift from the agreeable friends and the monotonous pleasures that were wasting him. He gave up his flat, sold his furniture, and went to Paris to live in Montparnasse, not the part of Paris he had known as a small boy. He points out that such a move was a bit more reckless in 1904 than it would be today. It was then that he discovered the work of Cézanne, Van Gogh, and Gauguin. As a literary man he was piqued by the weird stories he heard of Gauguin, and his imagination was fired by the artist's exotic pictures. He saw the possibilities for a novel, but he never utilized the material until after a trip to Tahiti ten years later. *The Moon and Sixpence* was written in 1918 while the author was recuperating from tuberculosis he had contracted earlier in the war. The farce *Home and Beauty* was written during the same period of convalescence.

The Moon and Sixpence is deliberately fragmentary in construction, but artistically satisfying in spite of its incompleteness. The interest of the novel is centred entirely in Charles Strickland, who indeed has much in common with the legendary Paul Gauguin—"legendary" because members of his family and other apologists have attempted to soften and

THE NOVELIST

humanize the eccentric artist. In Charles Strickland during his humdrum years as stockbroker the inhibited longings for artistic self-expression have been gathering strength, until finally their cumulative force can no longer be held in check, and he bursts suddenly and definitely all the bonds that have tied him to family, business, and society. It is not freedom he achieves—man is never free—for now he is ten times the slave to the unrivalled despotism of art. He brutally renounces all responsibilities to family, friends, and society. He is callous, unkind, merciless—horrible; he makes no effort to defend himself. He is possessed by a demon, wracked by an implacable necessity for expressing himself—not in words but in color and line. He is a genius and pursues his strange way because his obsession masters him completely. What the world considers proper, just, and honorable means nothing to him; he knows only that he must paint. He wants the moon, and cheerfully sacrifices not only the sixpence but family, friendship, physical comfort, respect of fellow-men, health,—even life itself. He dies in extreme poverty and loneliness. But his life is a success. Never was there such a brilliant example of Browning's "success in failure" (and how Browning would have been shocked and horrified by Strickland!), for Charles Strickland, like Thoreau, justifies his life to himself and regrets nothing. Before his death he

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

paints the walls of his house with strange and fantastic pictures into which he literally pours his whole soul. Dr. Coutras, who sees them, says: "It was a vision of the beginnings of the world, the garden of Eden . . . it was a hymn to the beauty of the human form, male and female, and the praise of Nature, sublime, indifferent, lovely and cruel. It gave you an awful sense of the infinity of space and of the endlessness of time . . . You saw man in the nakedness of his primeval instincts, and you were afraid, for you saw yourself."

But Strickland cares nothing for his reputation among the connoisseurs of Bond Street and the Leicester Galleries. He exacts a promise from his native wife that the house shall be destroyed after his death, and so the masterpiece disappears. The author imagines Strickland's last days. "Working silently knowing that it was his last chance [he was going blind], I fancied that here he must have said all that he knew of life and all that he divined. And I fancied that perhaps here he had at last found peace. The demon which possessed him was exorcised at last, and with the completion of the work, for which all his life had been a painful preparation, rest descended on his remote and tortured soul. He was willing to die, for he had fulfilled his purpose . . . I think Strickland knew it was a masterpiece. He had achieved what he wanted. His life

THE NOVELIST

was complete. He had made a world and saw that it was good. Then in pride and contempt, he destroyed it."

Paul Gauguin likewise was a successful stock-broker, superficially bourgeois and respectable. But, according to Émile Gauguin, his son, he had dabbled in paints all his life, and deserted the Bourse for the studio only after due consultation with Madame Gauguin. She agreed to let him go, not because she had faith in his genius, but because she respected his passion for art. The son declares that it was brave of her. It meant that she was to assume the burden of maintaining and educating the children. "*Sale bourgeoise*," Gauguin called her; but all his life he respected her. During Gauguin's wanderings he kept in touch with his family. His letters to his wife have been published and show him not devoid of human tenderness and fatherly affection. But the *Intimate Journals*, privately printed in 1923, reveal a Gauguin who is much like Charles Strickland. They show his sardonic humour, his stubborn spirit, his contempt of public and private opinion. Even his son says of the *Journals* that all his life Gauguin shocked smugly respectable people, shocked them deliberately and what is more fitting than that he should continue to shock them after death? The other sort of people, Émile Gauguin asserts, will not

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

fail to perceive that these journals are the spontaneous expression of the same free, fearless, sensitive spirit that speaks in the canvases of his father.

One circumstance of Gauguin's death Somerset Maugham strangely enough does not utilize in the novel; it would have afforded him a magnificent opportunity to exercise his peculiar gift of irony. During his years in Tahiti and the Marquesas, Gauguin had waged unceasing warfare against the Catholic clergy and missionaries, whom he denounced as parasites and shams. Yet when Gauguin died, a Catholic bishop claimed the body, and he was buried in consecrated ground with full Catholic pomp! One is amazed that Somerset Maugham overlooked this grotesquely amusing anti-climax to so unconventional a life.

The technique of *The Moon and Sixpence* is unusual. It is written in the first person, and the author makes no attempt to explain Strickland's conduct. He merely observes, and from a few scraps of experience pieces together the story. The author surrenders the novelist's right to omniscience, and gives us no insight into Strickland's mind; author and reader alike grope for motives, are revolted by Strickland's callousness and savagery, but are irresistibly drawn to the gaunt, repulsive, and haunting figure. We finish the book well aware that one human being can never know another,—Everyman

THE NOVELIST

goes his journey alone; yet do we know any better the characters of Henry James or Proust or Joyce for all the agonizing probing of personality and motive? Some critics have accused Mr. Maugham of evasion; some have lamented his failure to analyze completely a fascinating personality. But the incompleteness whets our interest in Strickland—and in the novel; and the final result is not one of patchiness, for almost as though we had observed this great genius in real life we begin to understand him and are, for a moment perhaps, able to assess life according to his own scale of values.

The popularity of the book is not easy to understand. It makes no concessions to sentiment and the candied idealism that flavor most successful novels. There are no concessions to the reader, no alleviation, except the humor, which, however, is biting and acid. There is no romance. There are no "sympathetic" characters, except Stroeve, who is a fool. There is no love, only a bleak and repellent passion. Strickland's life in lovely Tahiti is anything but idyllic. When one remembers that the bulk of novel-readers are women, one finds the popularity of *The Moon and Sixpence* even more puzzling, for the women characters are odious. Mrs. Strickland is smug, self-centred, nice. One chuckles understandingly when he reads Charles Strickland's famous comment: "God damn my wife. She is an excellent

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

woman. I wish she was in hell." She is the sort of woman whom Athelny fled from in *Of Human Bondage*, and who forced her husband to elope with the cook in *The Creative Impulse*. Blanche Stroeve is a nauseating trollop. Nor would the women-readers be flattered by Strickland's opinion of women and love—or the author's opinions. "The besetting sin of woman, the passion to discuss her most private affairs with anyone who is willing to listen." "A woman can forgive a man for the harm he has done her, but she can never forgive him for the sacrifices he makes on her account." "Because women can do nothing except love, they've given it a ridiculous importance. They want to persuade us that it's the whole of life. It's an insignificant part. I know lust. That's normal and healthy. Love is a disease." "She [Woman] has a small mind, and she resents the abstract, which she is unable to grasp. She is occupied with material things, and she is jealous of the ideal." The novel bristles with irritations for the average reader. It casually punctures his treasured ethical concepts. "The experience of life shows that people are constantly doing things which must lead to disaster, and yet by some chance manage to evade the result of their folly." "It is not true that suffering ennobles the character; happiness does that sometimes, but suffering, for the most part, makes men petty and vindictive." "A man is not what he wants

THE NOVELIST

to be, but what he must be." Nor was the popularity of the novel a *succès de scandale*, for not for some time was it recognised that Strickland was suggested by Gauguin. It is true, rather, that *The Moon and Sixpence* has greatly quickened the interest in Gauguin's pictures (as Browning's poems still draw gallery visitors to the paintings of Andrea del Sarto and Fra Lippo Lippi), and has added to their value. The Boston Museum paid over \$50,000 for one of Gauguin's paintings in 1936. In fact some of the many books dealing with Gauguin owe their inception to the controversy aroused by *The Moon and Sixpence*.

For many readers the reason for the novel's popularity is simple. The story has an absorbing interest. The reader, almost against his will, finds himself fascinated by the terrible Strickland. The absence of sentiment and idealism does not leave the book arid and cold, but clean, refreshing, and astringent. One understands how S. P. Mais can declare that it is the healthiest book he has ever read. At first one is inclined to think that the brilliant novel has only purely intellectual values to sustain it, but as one begins to acquaint himself with Strickland, he knows that it is more than a nakedly intellectual understanding. Unconsciously one is led (and this is a tribute to the novelist's cunning) to sympathize with Strickland, to feel with him—at least for the moment—that the claims of beauty rightfully take pre-

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

cedence over all others. "The passion that held Strickland was a passion to create beauty . . . It urged him hither and thither. He was eternally a pilgrim, haunted by a divine nostalgia, and the demon within him was ruthless." At last one is forced to admire one who, as Thoreau phrases it, heard a different drummer from the one most of us hear, but who uncompromisingly kept step to the drummer he heard. He courageously went on a pilgrimage "to a shrine which perhaps does not exist," and we cannot follow him; but from the account of his quest we gain a deeper reverence for beauty and perhaps for tolerance.



Nor until 1925, six years after the publication of *The Moon and Sixpence*, did the next novel, *The Painted Veil*, appear. In the interval he had written a number of short stories with an Eastern setting, a volume of sketches (*On a Chinese Screen*), and a half dozen plays. *The Painted Veil* was an immediate product of a long journey through the Far East. Somerset Maugham had a sharp eye for the odd and the beautiful in China, and with amused detachment he observed the British Colonials—the Englishman is reputed to be a less engaging figure

THE NOVELIST

away from home than he is by his own fireside or in his own garden; he also had a sharp ear and retentive memory for the stories he heard in trains, steamships, or clubrooms.

This is no place to discuss the ethics of the novelist's craft, but it is alleged that certain characterizations and events of *The Letter*, *The Painted Veil*, and other stories have caused no little embarrassment in certain Chinese or Malaysian communities and some animosity towards the author. Perhaps Mr. Maugham's wise comment, "If the shoe fits, wear it!" is sufficient reply for the average reader, but it is not always enough before the rigors of the law of libel. *The Painted Veil* was first published serially in a magazine. The novelist called the bacteriologist and wife Lane, and used Hong-Kong as the setting. A Mr. and Mrs. Lane in Hong-Kong sued the magazine, and collected two hundred and fifty pounds. Mr. Maugham then renamed his characters Fane, and thereby aroused an Assistant Colonial Secretary, who considered himself libelled. By this time the novel had been published, but it was recalled and Hong-Kong was changed to Tching-Yen. The author notes with characteristic amusement that the astute reviewers who "neglected" to return their first copies have (or had) in their possession a book of considerable bibliographical value. In the second and subsequent editions the

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

novelist has included an interesting "Author's Note." In it he states that he selects the names of his characters from the obituary column of the *Times*, and that inevitably he occasionally hits upon the name of a living character in an actual locality he has used. He maintains vigorously, however, that all characters and events in *The Painted Veil* are imaginary.

He asserts, moreover, that the roots of *The Painted Veil* go back to his student days at St. Thomas's. While reading Dante during a holiday in Florence, he was much struck by a passage pregnant with suggestions for a novelist:—

*Siena mi fe; disfecemi Maremma:
Sulsi Colui, che, innanellata pria
Disposando m'avea con la sua gemma.*

"Siena made me, Maremma unmade me: this he knows who after betrothal espoused me with his ring." The young medical student's instructress in Italian, his landlady's daughter, had her own interpretation of the lines: a gentlewoman of Siena, Pia, was suspected of adultery by her husband, who exposed her to the noxious vapors of his castle in the Maremma. She did not die, however, and he finally had her killed. The story stuck in Somerset Maugham's mind, and he often repeated the line: *Siena mi fe: disfecemi Maremma.* It was not until

THE NOVELIST

his journey to China many years later that he hit upon the modern setting and circumstances which would make the story plausible today. He confesses that *The Painted Veil* is the only novel he has written in which he started from a story rather than from a character.

Perhaps because the author was more concerned with story than character this novel is inferior to *Mrs. Craddock*, *Of Human Bondage*, *The Moon and Sixpence*, and *Cakes and Ale*. These four novels one can read again and again, for Bertha Craddock, Philip Carey, Charles Strickland, and Rosie Driffield are flesh and blood people who provoke our interest and curiosity. But the characters of *The Painted Veil* are trivial people whose adventures the author, always a first-rate story-teller, makes interesting but not moving. It is a matter of indifference to the reader whether Kitty Fane commits adultery or not, whether her husband shoots her or not, whether they all die of the plague or not. Such a collection of despicable people! Kitty's father is a cipher, a breadwinner without personality or dignity. Her mother is rapacious, scheming, unscrupulous. Her sister is frivolous and self-centred. Her husband is completely without elegance, charm, and humor. Her lover is stupid, selfish, and vain.

Never has Somerset Maugham needed his gifts of story-telling so desperately as in *The Painted Veil*,

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

and for the first three-fourths of the novel they do not fail him. The opening scene is exciting, and there is no slowing of tempo in the following scenes—the discovery that the husband knows; the flight of Kitty to her lover, who with honeyed words abandons her; the rather melodramatic revenge of the outraged husband; the journey to the ravaged province and the death of the husband from the plague. The rest of the story, after the situation from *Purgatorio* has been used, is feeble. The author's oft-repeated declaration that a story must have a beginning, a middle, and an end finds no brilliant illustration here. *The Painted Veil* sputters out as it could have done fifty pages earlier or later. The dialogue of the last pages is theatrical in the manner of Pinero, and the final sentence is as shocking and irrelevant as the closing line of Galsworthy's *Justice*.

For all its shortcomings *The Painted Veil* is a novel of engrossing interest, and even the mediocre last section is brightened by passages of characteristic satire. Although the author intends that we be concerned about the characters, for he spends considerable time in analyzing motivation and thought processes, we find the men and women sufficiently boring to divert our attention to the action. Fortunately throughout most of the novel the action is brisk and plausible. The theme of sexual infidelity

THE NOVELIST

is of course hackneyed (the author himself has recently said that adultery can now serve only as a theme for comedy), and only because of the author's gifts as a narrative-writer—his sense of the dramatic, his detachment, his shunning of the superfluous, his clear, liquid style—does *The Painted Veil* triumph over its outworn subject matter. Moreover he writes with a healthy frankness and straightforwardness, recognizing no phase of life as "improper"; yet he is never downright offensive (except for one infamous line in a later novel), for no author has a greater horror of pornography. His treatment of sex—he makes no nice Victorian distinctions between love and sex—is honest and simple, a model for any writer who strives to avoid the ludicrous reticence of the Victorians or the physiology of Lawrence or Joyce. It is perhaps because of the subject matter that *The Painted Veil* has been acclaimed by French critics as the author's masterpiece.

There are passages in *The Painted Veil* that show Somerset Maugham's love of beauty. There are exquisite descriptions of the Chinese countryside, of the devastated city, of the convent, which is an oasis of unselfish service and kindness. Waddington, the customs officer, is a sort of *raisonneur* or chorus, who speaks for the author. The novelist makes him bald and ugly, probably to discourage any "affair" with Kitty. A free-thinker, man of the world,

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

kindly cynic, much of his philosophy is Somerset Maugham's. Speaking of the nuns he remarks, "I wonder if it matters that what they have aimed at is illusion. Their lives are in themselves beautiful. I have an idea that the only thing which makes it possible to regard this world we live in without disgust is the beauty which now and then men create out of the chaos, the pictures they paint, the music they compose, the books they write, and the lives they lead. Of all these the richest in beauty is the beautiful life. That is the perfect work of art." Sometimes he reminds one of Cronshaw in *Of Human Bondage*: "Some of us look for the Way in opium and some in God, some of us in whisky and some in love. It is all the same Way and it leads nowhere." He says of his religion, "I describe myself as a member of the Church of England, which I suppose is an inoffensive way of saying that you don't believe in anything very much." Other shafts of sarcasm are directed towards the colonial official. "As long as Charlie Townsend's got her to depend on he's pretty safe never to do a foolish thing, and that's the first thing necessary for a man to get on in Government service. They don't want clever men; clever men have ideas, and ideas cause trouble; they want men who have charm and tact and who can be counted on never to make a blunder." Another object of satiric criticism is the way in which many

THE NOVELIST

English girls are educated and "brought up," the one objective being a rich marriage. At the end of the book Kitty speaks of her unborn child: "I want a girl because I want to bring her up so that she shan't make the mistakes I've made. When I look back upon the girl I was I hate myself. But I never had a chance. I'm going to bring up my daughter so that she's free and can stand on her own feet. I'm not going to bring a child into the world, and love her, and bring her up, just so that some man will want to sleep with her so much that he's willing to provide her with board and lodging for the rest of her life."

The novel was dramatized by Bartlett Cormack without success. In order to create some sympathy for Kitty, the dramatist emphasized the shortcomings of her early environment, but the audience was as indifferent as the readers of the novel. On the stage the husband was somewhat pathetic; he was represented as one of the unfortunate people who are capable of loving deeply but incapable of arousing love in others. (Was there ever a more monstrous fallacy than "Love is the reflection of love"?) Waddington is a more important character in the dramatic version. He resolves the action, and at the end of the play he and Kitty decide to marry—since neither has any illusions left! The moving picture distortion of the story was even more fantastic: by

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

helping the nuns in time of plague, Kitty undergoes a complete regeneration of character (Hollywood's favorite miracle), and she and her husband are happily reconciled before his death.

Although the suggestion for the story came from Dante, the title itself derives from Shelley ". . . the painted veil which those who live call Life."



IN 1930 was published the first humorous novel by Somerset Maugham since *The Bishop's Apron* a quarter of a century before. *Cakes and Ale* is a masterpiece of restrained ironic comedy; it is one of the most amusing novels of our time. There is no verbal smartness as in Eric Linklater, or wry laughter at the grotesque in modern life as in Beverly Nichols and other terrible infants, no robust exaggeration as in Sinclair Lewis, who carries on the Mark Twain tradition of broad humor. Instead there is the suave humor of high comedy; if there is not actual laughter, there is civilized smiling at the pretentious, the pompous, the fraudulent; there is tolerant smiling at human frailty. The reviewers and critics were mistaken when they declared the book to be bitter; for it is a merry book from the pleasantly ironic comments on philanthropy on the very first page to

THE NOVELIST

the very last sentence, which is exceedingly diverting. The minor chord of *Mrs. Craddock, Of Human Bondage*, and *The Moon and Sixpence* is missing; the two general themes are not unpleasant: the humors of making and retaining a literary reputation, and the story of an amoral genius at the oldest of the professions. The literary humbug is presented with much good-natured malice; the aged novelist with kindness and humor; and the prostitute with unsentimental truth tinged with affection.

Cakes and Ale enjoyed an immediate *succès de scandale* when outraged critics rushed to defend the memory of Thomas Hardy, who had died in 1928, and who they asserted was slandered in the character of Edward Driffield. The author's vigorous denial of the charge does not dispose of the striking similarities in the careers of Hardy and Driffield, of similarities even in personal habits and appearance. Both were of humble origins; both were interested in architecture; both married twice; the themes of their novels were similar; both were accused of coarseness, and their books were at times banned by the libraries; *The Cup of Life* is not unlike *Jude the Obscure*; the reputation of both was augmented by their longevity; both in old age lived in semi-retirement in a beautiful country-house solicitously ministered by a much younger wife; both were earthy and completely free of preciosity or

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

affectation; both were rather slight and frail physically. But there are differences: Driffield ran away to sea when a boy; their tastes in music were violently different; the Driffield "country" is Kent, not Wessex; no Mrs. Barton Trafford served as publicity director for Hardy, whose reputation was in no way synthetic; Hardy was more poet than novelist; the first Mrs. Hardy was a woman of blameless reputation and refinement.

Somerset Maugham writes, "He was no more in my mind than George Meredith or Anatole France . . . I had been struck by the notion that the veneration to which an author full of years and honor is exposed must be irksome to the little alert soul within him that is alive still to the adventures of his fancy . . . I read *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* when I was eighteen with such enthusiasm that I determined to marry a milkmaid, but I had never been so much taken with Hardy's other books as were most of my contemporaries, and I did not think his English very good . . . I knew little of Hardy's life." But the critics were not placated; Hardy's recent death and the extravagant praise bestowed upon his books at that time made the members of this usually callous profession inordinately sensitive. "Trampling on Thomas Hardy's grave," "hitting below the shroud," "sadistic savoring of some of the titbits of scandal," "grave profaned by literary

THE NOVELIST

"ghoul" were typical expressions used by outraged critics. The tumult and shouting died almost immediately. Staunchest admirers of Hardy read *Cakes and Ale* today with amusement, for they see at once that on the whole the picture of Driffield is sympathetic, and that there is no attempt to belittle his genius.

The critics were much less exercised over the character of Alroy Kear, whose head is cut off with a golden axe on nearly every page of the novel. Never was there more devastating portrait of a self-deceived humbug. Obviously the limning of Alroy Kear was a task of sheer joy to Somerset Maugham, for he saddled upon him most of the qualities he detests in fellow-craftsmen. Kear is a great literary success. He has no enemies. He has never written a line that could offend the most fastidious, or expressed an opinion that could frighten the most timid. He is optimistic, hearty, athletic, smooth. He knows how to tame recalcitrant critics, eradicate jealousy in his fellow-writers, and adorn equally well the speaker's platform of a woman's club and the smoking room of a men's club. He is unscrupulous, time-serving, ruthless, but withal so gracious, charming, and affable that one sees how the uncritical would find him irresistible.

More than one novelist felt himself lampooned in Alroy Kear. It was reported that one author, a

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

darling of the American lecture platform and the veritable Sir Galahad of modern English fiction, was furious. But Mr. Maugham blandly maintained that Kear is a composite portrait: "I took the appearance from one writer, the obsession with good society from another, the heartiness from a third, the pride in athletic prowess from a fourth, and a great deal from myself. For I have a grim capacity for seeing my own absurdity and I find in myself much to excite my ridicule." He declares that authors are justified in promoting a certain amount of self-advertisement, for if books are worth reading, the public must hear of them. Kear's never-ceasing urge for the limelight would be grotesque were it not so common; for publicity in our age is not a minor but a major deity.

Although the characters of Driffield and Kear aroused great curiosity, and although Somerset Maugham first thought of *Cakes and Ale* as a short story centred about a great novelist, the principal character of the novel is Rosie. In the author's notebook was the following entry: "I am asked to write my reminiscences of a famous novelist, a friend of my boyhood, living at W. with a common wife, very unfaithful to him. There he writes his great books. Later he marries his secretary, who guards him and makes him into a figure. My wonder whether in old age he is not slightly restive at being

THE NOVELIST

made into a monument." His intention was to use the material in a short story. For a long time he had had the character of Rosie in mind; in his imagination she lived for years before he found the proper framework for her. When it occurred to him to use Rosie as the first wife of the novelist he was delighted; here was the correct setting for this character, already full-grown before he set pen to paper. Not wishing to waste Rosie on a short story or a novelette, he planned the novel. He used again the Kentish setting of *Of Human Bondage*, and even certain characters: his uncle, the curate, his aunt, the maid, and even Philip Carey, who becomes Willie Ashenden.

Rosie is the protagonist of *Cakes and Ale*; her philosophy of life gives the novel its title, her charm and beauty warm its pages. Perhaps this *grande amoureuse* will never seem so credible to most Anglo-Saxon readers as to the author and his large following across the Channel. When a barmaid she was notoriously free with her favors to sailors and workmen. She becomes the mistress of Driffield, later his wife, and is repeatedly unfaithful to him. Finally she runs away from him with a bounder whom she has loved for years. She never becomes coarse in word, manner, or appearance. She attaches no importance to incontinence, and gives herself freely to those she likes, merely to afford happiness. When

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

Ashenden discovers her promiscuity, he is quite upset.

"Oh, my dear, why d'you bother your head about any others? What harm does it do you? Aren't you happy when you're with me?"

"Awfully."

"Well, then. It's so silly to be fussy and jealous. Why not be happy with what you can get? Enjoy yourself while you have the chance, I say; we shall all be dead in a hundred years and what will anything matter then? Let's have a good time while we can."

According to Anglo-Saxon prejudices Rosie should coarsen as the years pass; if spared by Providence an ignominious death, she should be lonely, miserable, and dowdy in her old age. But like Dreiser, Somerset Maugham knows little of poetic justice. Rosie not only grows more beautiful with the years, but her beauty acquires a fresh, virginal quality. After her elopement with "Lord" George, she lives happily with him in New York until his death. He leaves her a small fortune, and at the end of the novel we see her as a happy old woman, smartly dressed, devoting her last days to gossip, bridge, the Sunday *New York Times*, and the troops of friends her perennial charm provides for her. Here is a flouting of copy-book maxims with a vengeance.

THE NOVELIST

One is reminded of the shocking end of Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and W. L. George's *A Bed of Roses*.

Near the end of the novel is an amusing discussion of Rosie by Ashenden and the second Mrs. Driffield, who knew Rosie only by reputation. Mrs. Driffield ventures the opinion that Rosie was not a very nice woman.

"That's where you make a mistake," I replied. "She was a very nice woman. I never saw her in a bad temper . . . I never heard her say a disagreeable thing about any one. She had a heart of gold . . . She was as good as she was beautiful."

And to the charge that she was promiscuous he replied:

"She was a very simple woman. Her instincts were healthy and ingenuous. She loved to make people happy . . . She was naturally affectionate . . . It was not vice; it was not lasciviousness; it was her nature. She gave herself as naturally as the sun gives heat or the flowers their perfume. It was a pleasure to others. It had no effect on her character; she remained sincere, unspoiled, artless."

Rosie is a unique character in English fiction.

It is not probable that many authorities on novel-writing (whom Mr. Maugham enjoys inveighing against in a good-natured way) would approve of the

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

structure of *Cakes and Ale*. It is possible that the themes do not fuse very well; the narrative stops repeatedly for caustic asides by the author, or for familiar essays on a variety of subjects—proposed use of the House of Lords, nineteenth century snobbery, the character of Half Moon Street, beauty, his landlady of medical school days, and a dozen other subjects; it is possible that many of the incidents do not advance the plot at all. It doesn't matter. There is not a dull page in the novel—what more can a reader demand of a novel than that it be unflaggingly entertaining? There are passages of brilliant satire, particularly those dealing with Kear and Mrs. Barton Strafford. There are passages of exquisite humor—the astounding wink of old Driffield at the luncheon party is unforgettable. Rosie's last remark—made in all sincerity—that she liked "Lord" George because he was always a perfect gentleman ends the novel on the correct comic level. Although not so big or so moving as *Of Human Bondage*, *Cakes and Ale* is its superior in richness of style and subtle characterization.



IN THE Preface to *Cosmopolitans* Somerset Maugham discusses the purpose of the novel: "The University

THE NOVELIST

of Columbia a little while ago very kindly sent me a little book entitled *Modern Fiction* written by two of its professors. I read it with interest and edification . . . It treats of no book that it does not make one wish to read again. It is tolerant, perspicacious and stimulating. But there is one thing about it that very much surprised me. The books of which it treats are discussed in the most improving way. Their technique is acutely analyzed. Their value as psychological, sociological or ethical documents is estimated. But I can find nowhere a reference to their entertainment. So far as I can make out these two professors in all the years during which they have taught the ardent young who attended their lectures never even hinted to them that a novel should be read for fun. The novel may stimulate you to think. It may satisfy your aesthetic sense. It may arouse your moral emotions. But if it does not entertain you it is a bad novel." He suggests that one turns to a sociologist if he wishes to learn of sociology, or to the psychologist if he wishes to learn of psychology. At first glance what he says is so self-evident that one wonders that it had to be said at all; but one suspects that many novelists and critics, judging by their novels and criticisms, do not agree with him. The real weakness in his argument lies in the word "entertain," which is a variable. There are readers, for example, and Somerset

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

Maugham is among them, who are bored by Dumas and entertained by Proust.

One may define an entertaining novel as one which has an absorbing story, an agreeable style free of irritating eccentricities, and a group of living and diversified characters who are interesting in themselves; and which, in addition, may unobtrusively contain what Somerset Maugham calls the author's private view of the universe, for as an artist a novelist may impose design upon his materials. Whatever one's definition, there are few intelligent readers who would not find *The Narrow Corner* entertaining. Its reception by the critics was somewhat amusing. The average review was patronizing. More than one critic admitted that the story was unfolded in a masterly fashion and that it was impossible not to finish the book once it was begun; but their praise was temperate, for here was a novel unconcerned with problems and providing no sweeping view of an era or a society. It was simply entertaining.

Of the five principal characters one appears in *The Moon and Sixpence* and another in "The Stranger," a sketch in *On A Chinese Screen*. Captain Nichols of *The Moon and Sixpence* is the beachcomber who helps Charles Strickland secure passage from Marseilles to the South Seas. In "The Stranger" Dr. Saunders annoys a missionary who has fled from the steaming Chinese city to the cool of the hills. Both

THE NOVELIST

men are pictured just as we find them in *The Narrow Corner*. The novelist has said that these preliminary sketches did not dismiss these two attractive scamps from his mind, and that eventually their story had to be written. The other characters are more heterogeneous. Fred Blake is a commonplace young fellow with three claims to eminence: his skill at dancing and at cribbage and his extraordinary good looks. Unfortunately these advantages bring about his tragic end. Erik Christessen is a Scandinavian giant, gentle and idealistic. His idealism brings about his tragedy. Louise Frith is a Nordic jewel set in the silver South Sea, free of inhibitions and coldly determined not to let herself be possessed. When the lives of these five people touch, tragedy comes not to those without morals but to those without philosophy. The innocent perish through their weakness, but the unscrupulous survive through their strength.

In no other novel has Somerset Maugham combined wit, philosophy, mystery, humor, and definite scrutiny of character and motive so successfully as in *The Narrow Corner*. The central character is Dr. Saunders, whose shady activities in his profession have caused his removal from the Register; he then settles in China and succeeds in his practice. He has acquired an ironical philosophy, a deep sense of humor, and a complete tolerance of other people's

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

vices. He is shrewd and takes nothing at its face value. Without morals or faith or human ties he is one of the happiest of all Mr. Maugham's characters. He is a hedonist, but in addition to good food, drink, and comfort he enjoys watching the spectacle of human life and is diverted by the phenomena of human behavior. His philosophy of life is approximately that of Philip Carey's at the end of *Of Human Bondage* and Somerset Maugham's in *The Summing Up*. He accepts without surprise the complexity and unaccountability of human nature. He regards illusions and sincere idealism as menaces to happiness, and fraudulent idealism as the most revolting of vices. He rejects asceticism and has learned to regret nothing. "Life is short, nature is hostile, and man is ridiculous; but oddly enough most misfortunes have their compensations, and with a certain humor and a good deal of horse-sense one can make a fairly good job of what is after all a matter of very small consequence." He is quick to detect uncalculated goodness, and that exquisite phrase "the beauty of holiness" has a meaning for him. He has acquired resignation "by the help of an unfailing sense of the ridiculous." And at the end of the book he looks toward the future with confidence, sure of his spiritual independence, free of human bondage. "It was an exquisite pleasure to him to know that there was no one in the world who was essential to

THE NOVELIST

his peace of mind." It is characteristic of Somerset Maugham's sense of humor that he should give to a minor rogue so much of his own philosophy of life.

Captain Nichols is less complex. He is a rascal of the first order, and does not flinch even at murder when it is to his advantage. But he is not without a sense of humor, and is almost without fear. His courageous behavior during the storm would well become a saint in a similar crisis. Dishonest, shifty, untrustworthy, he nevertheless possesses a dauntless courage, which deserts him only when Mrs. Nichols, prim, calm, and determined, appears on the scene and reduces him at once to a cringing subjection.

Louise Frith is in some ways the most striking character in *The Narrow Corner*. The women of Somerset Maugham's novels are highly individualized. In the characterizations of Liza, Bertha Ley, Mildred, Blanche Stroeve, Kitty Fane, Rosie Driffield, Louise Frith, and Julia Lambert he does not repeat himself. His estimation of women in his fiction and plays is usually harsh and unflattering, but he writes with affection of Rosie, and with cold admiration of Louise. Louise Frith is intelligent and not without culture and sophistication, but she is an amoral primitive. She lives by instinct, but uses her intelligence to guard her independence, which thoughtless submission to her instincts would destroy. She knows neither inhibitions nor remorse.

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

When her infidelity drives Erik to suicide, she herself takes the edge off the tragedy by her cold analysis:

"I'm dreadfully sorry he's dead. I owe a great deal to him. But I'm not to blame . . . He didn't know it, but it wasn't me he loved, it was mother. She knew it and at the end I think she loved him, too . . . What he loved in me was my mother, and he never knew that either . . . You blame me. Anyone would. I don't blame myself. Erik killed himself because I'd fallen short of the ideal he'd made of me. If he'd loved me he might have killed me or he might have forgiven me . . . I tell you he didn't love me. He loved his ideal. My mother's beauty and my mother's qualities in me and those Shakespeare heroines of his and the princesses in Hans Andersen's fairy tales. What right have people to make an image after their own heart and force it on you and be angry if it doesn't fit you? He wanted to imprison me in his ideal . . . and Fred in his way was the same. When he lay by my side that night he said he'd like to stay here always on this island, and marry me and cultivate the plantation, and I don't know what else. He wanted, too, to imprison me in his dream. But I am I. I don't want to dream anyone else's dream. I want to dream my own. All that's happened is terrible and my heart is heavy, but at the back of my mind I know it's given me freedom."

"Short, therefore, is man's life, and narrow is the

THE NOVELIST

corner of the earth wherein he dwells." *The Narrow Corner* might too, have been called *Of Human Bondage*. For although on the surface it is a story of mystery and tragic adventure, it is leavened with philosophy and lifted far above the average novel of adventure by its penetrating study of character. For Somerset Maugham is more than a great storyteller; he knows people, knows that man is neither good nor bad and that thinking will not make him so. There are brief descriptive passages of rare beauty, although he does not idealize the South Seas. There is comedy, too; especially memorable in its grim humor is the burial of the Japanese diver. The novelist does not fall into the Dickensian trap of hyperbolising the eccentricities of Frith and his father-in-law or the stomach distresses of Captain Nichols. *The Narrow Corner* has proportion, restraint, suavity, tolerance, understanding. It is a wise book, and makes no sentimental concessions either to the romantic setting or the dramatic theme of the story.



Theatre (1937) was the first of Somerset Maugham's books to be written after he had completed what he terms the writing section of his life-

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

pattern. It is not a book that demanded to be written; it did not serve to rid his soul of plaguing obsessions. He wrote it for his own amusement, hoping that it would please readers as well. It succeeded in pleasing many readers (it became a best-seller in both England and America immediately after publication) but it disappointed those who expected a worthy successor to *Mrs. Craddock, Of Human Bondage*, and *Cakes and Ale*. Its theme and characters are trivial, it has neither depth nor sweep, on page after page it dips perilously close to the merely shoddy—yet the average novelist would gladly give an arm to be able to manufacture a novel equally good! *Theatre* is as artificial and unsubstantial as the title suggests, for its world is the weird microcosm of the theatre. It is a world that Somerset Maugham knew intimately: for many years he had supplied it with plays; he was acquainted with its managers and the fantastic economy of the most capricious of all business enterprises; he knew personally most of the great English and American actors and actresses of his day. When he wrote this novel he no longer entertained any romantic notions concerning the reality, significance, or glamor of the theatre.

“I have sought to worm myself into a woman’s heart and see life through her eyes and feel emotion through her sensibilities. No one but a woman can

THE NOVELIST

tell if I have succeeded." What a monstrous blurb from Somerset Maugham! The world through Julia Lambert's eyes is indeed a stage; her every action is a performance, every remark a "line," every emotion calculated and in character. In moments of crisis when her soul (that is, her egregious vanity) is touched, she quotes apt lines from her plays. Her husband, her son, her lovers, and her acquaintances (she neither has nor desires friends) are merely more intimate parts of her vast audience. She becomes practically incapable of honest emotion, and like Lady Kitty's, her soul is as thickly rouged as her face. When humiliated or insulted, she is aware that the actress, not the woman, resents the affront.

"People thought that she only acted during the two or three hours she was on the stage; they did not know that the character she was playing dwelt in the back of her mind all day long . . . It often seemed to her that she was two persons, the actress, the popular favorite, the best-dressed woman in London, and that was a shadow; and the woman she was playing at night, and that was the substance."

In the only near-poignant scene in the novel her eighteen-year-old son excoriates her for her exhibitionism and hollow life, but Julia can hardly understand what he means, and considers him a prig. One remark, however, comes so close to penetrating her

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

incrustation of sham and make-believe that for a moment she is vaguely uneasy: "When I've seen you go into an empty room I've sometimes wanted to open the door suddenly, but I've been afraid to in case I found nobody there." If one were to worm himself into Julia's heart he would find himself in a vacuum.

The other characters in *Theatre* are no less disagreeable than Julia. Her husband is vain, humorless, undersexed. Her lover is a revolting, caddish gigolo with no charms beyond his bedroom finesse. Her most intimate acquaintance, a woman she thoroughly detests, is a gross, gushing homosexual. If such monstrosities were to people a sincere novel like *Of Human Bondage*, one would find the book almost painfully unreadable. But in *Theatre* they move in a world as remote and artificial as the world of *The Country Wife* or *Our Betters*, and we read of them with detached amusement. *Theatre* could end in a dozen different ways, none of which would touch the reader emotionally. The author chooses to end it with a brilliant flouting of poetic justice: Julia triumphs over a young rival, she retains both husband and gigolo, and she faces her tinsel world cheerful and confident.

Part III

DRAMATIST

SINCE the production of *Sheppey* in 1933 Somerset Maugham has steadily referred to himself as an ex-dramatist. There is little reason for not believing that he has retired from the theatre. He has written all the plays that he has felt impelled to write. He believes that his peculiar gift in the composition of prose drama could not be further exercised to advantage, and he does not care to go on repeating himself. He knows that plays, other than period pieces like *The Happy Hypocrite* and *Pride and Prejudice*, to be successful must catch the atmosphere of the present, and he finds that he no longer possesses much interest in subjects of popular appeal to contemporary audiences. He grew impatient with the conventions and limitations of drama, and enjoyed the comparative liberty of fiction. He observed with misgiving that when Henry Arthur Jones and Sir Arthur Pinero had outlived their day in the theatre, they nevertheless attempted again and

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

again to regain their lost popularity; both had been invaluable pioneers in ushering in a more adult drama, but they did not yield gracefully to the new generation and were somewhat embittered in old age. He saw that the older dramatists, like Halvard Solness and the older architects, must give way to the new, and he was willing enough to withdraw in favor of Noel Coward, John Van Druten, Denis Johnston, Rodney Ackland, and their enterprising contemporaries. Besides, temperamentally and philosophically he is capable of taking a Lucretian pleasure in watching the struggles of others on a battlefield from which he has retired. He was aware of the difficulties in proper casting occasioned by the competition of the moving pictures. He had, moreover, for some time suspected that prose drama as he and his contemporaries had known it had exhausted itself and that it would soon be succeeded by a new form. He had neither the interest nor energy to be a pioneer. He had had all the experience that it seemed possible the theatre could give him, he says in *The Summing Up*. He had made as much money as he needed. He had achieved notoriety and fame, but he wanted to achieve perfection. He felt he could come closer to this perfection in fiction than in drama.

Somerset Maugham's work in the drama, then, we can view in its entirety, unless some future Elisa-

DRAMATIST

beth Bergner inspires him to fresh composition as Barrie was moved to write again. It is not likely. His pleasure in writing fiction permits him to leave the drama without regret. Between 1898 and 1933 he wrote thirty plays, a moderate *théâtre* for a period of thirty-five years. He has selected eighteen plays for the collected edition of his works and hopes that the others will be forgotten. It is a hope almost certain of realization. Of the twelve, two one-act trifles, an adaptation from Molière, and two long serious plays, *The Camel's Back* and *Love in a Cottage* have never been published; another one-act play, *Marriages are Made in Heaven*, is safely buried in the 1903 number of *The Venture*; and there remain six long plays, all published, which the author thinks unworthy of a place among his collected works.

It cannot be said that Somerset Maugham's contribution to the drama is of extraordinary importance, if we mean by importance striking ingenuity in technique, such as practised by Sean O'Casey, Pirandello, or Georg Kaiser, or a display of stimulating ideas as in the plays of Bernard Shaw, Granville-Barker, and the brothers Čapek. He has founded no school. When the definitive history of early twentieth century drama is written, some scholars may overlook his plays entirely. In his best plays he strives to be intelligent rather than intellectual. He prefers the fact to the symbol of the

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

fact, and refuses to believe that man's concepts are so abstruse and complex that the tortuosities of elaborate symbolism, choral chants, and the various devices of modern expressionism are necessary for their communication to an audience. We may disagree as to the answers to ethical questions raised by his plays, but we are never in doubt as to the direction of his plots or the meaning of the action of his *dramatis personae*. In formulating early in life his artistic creed, he put lucidity first among the virtues of style. In *The Summing Up*, speaking of the lucid and simple style of Berkeley and Hume, he remarks that he has never had much patience with the writers who claim from the reader an effort to understand their meaning. He cannot believe that the thoughts they have to express are so profound that they cannot be put in plain speech. He notes that there are two causes of obscurity, both inexcusable: negligence and wilfulness. Perhaps wilfulness is the more exasperating of the two, for it denotes what he terms an aristocratic allusiveness, a striving for the spuriously esoteric. When the admirers of James Joyce, Marianne Moore, or Gertrude Stein—or Browning, even, attack obscurities and extract a meaning (sometimes they agree on the meaning), they quite often discover commonplace notions beneath the confusion of language. In his best plays Somerset Maugham has achieved this lucidity with-

DRAMATIST

out underestimating the intelligence of his audience. In his serious plays he has appealed to thoughtful audiences but has successfully avoided the uplands of Arcadia. He is not to be found among the high-brows. He has made us flinch at the word "cultured" just as Rosie and Mildred have forced us to discard "a perfect gentleman" from our serious vocabulary.

It is difficult to deny the truth of Somerset Maugham's contention that the prose drama is the most ephemeral of all the arts, and that too much fuss is made over it. Poetry, sculpture, painting, furniture design, architecture, and the shapes and decorations of pottery may delight for centuries and retain dignity and beauty. But prose drama must make a lively appeal not only to its age but to its day. Mr. Maugham points out that "no form of art has a more vivid appeal than the drama, but it is just this vividness that makes it so impermanent. The foundation of living drama is actuality. It must be natural above all things and it achieves the illusion of truth by reproducing as exactly as the exigencies of the theatre permit the manners and customs of the day." And since these manners and customs change, the drama surrenders its illusion of actuality and becomes either tiresomely unconvincing or quaint. Of the countless prose plays written in the eighteenth century, a bare half dozen can

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

amuse a twentieth century audience. It must be confessed that much of the laughter bestowed upon *The School for Scandal*, *The Rivals*, and *She Stoops to Conquer* is traditional and polite rather than spontaneous. We see these plays again and again with affection: we exempt them from serious criticism as we would a beloved but eccentric grandparent. Of the thousands of English and American plays of the nineteenth century, how many are endurable today? *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *The Devil's Disciple*, *Arms and the Man*, *Candida*—are there any more? *Caste* has the innocent charm of a sampler, but it carries no conviction as drama; likewise, *Trelawney of the Wells* is quaint and tender—but dreadfully tedious. Where are all the masterpieces which seemed sure to survive their age—*The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, *The Liars*, *Black-eyed Susan*, *The Lady of Lyons*, *A Pair of Spectacles*, *The Colleen Bawn*? They were good plays in their day, as good as the plays of Noel Coward, James Bridie, Philip Barry are to the 1930's. Before long their plays will make room on their shelf for the "great" plays of tomorrow. A century hence *Private Lives*, if performed, will differ from a comedy by Oscar Wilde principally in its costuming.

A great deal of what Somerset Maugham regards as nonsense has been written about the drama. William Archer in *The Old Drama and the New* has

DRAMATIST

attacked the insincere worship of museum pieces of the past, and helped clear the air, as Mark Twain in *Innocents Abroad* had fallen upon the fraudulent enthusiasms of sightseers. Changes in taste seem inevitable, and each age must write its own drama. Of course, there come down from the past a few works of genius such as *Antigone*, *Hamlet*, *Faust*, *Cyrano de Bergerac*, in which lofty poetry or generic truth of characterization or philosophy triumphs over the local and transitory; but timeless plays are few in number. Manners, fashions in technique, language, even emotions change. We do not always agree with our ancestors on what deserves laughter and what deserves reverence. Schoolmasters have done inestimable harm to Shakespeare by emphasizing his humor; the dullest boy in the class is aware that *The Humorist* or *Judge* is infinitely more amusing than a Shakespearean clown and comes to regard the study of Shakespeare as a form of punishment. Somerset Maugham disbelieves in the platitude that human nature and serious emotions do not change. "For instance, we do not believe in jealousy any more. We no longer look upon a woman's chastity as her essential virtue. I submit to my brother dramatists that the unfaithfulness of a wife is no longer a subject for drama, but only for comedy." "A change of manners has made the subjection of wives to their husbands and the respect of children for

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

their parents bear a ludicrous air." Most of the old plays with power to delight us survive as poems rather than as credible dramas.

Enthusiasts of the modern drama, however, point out that within the past forty years the drama has succeeded in sloughing off many of the elements that make for impermanence. The modern drama in England began with the surface realism of T. W. Robertson, the broadening of subject matter for plays by Henry Arthur Jones and Arthur Pinero, the cultivation of the drama of ideas by Shaw, Granville-Barker, Hankin, and their disciples, and in general by the gradual seeping through of Ibsen's influence for realism and untheatricality. The growth of the scientific spirit in the late nineteenth century and the gradual decline in the power of the church (accelerated by the World War) were first reflected in realistic and naturalistic fiction, but inevitably made themselves felt on the stage in spite of rigorous censorship. Jones and Pinero wrote plays of social import, but treated characters and problems in a sentimental and Victorian manner. Shaw used the stage as a pulpit, assailed outworn conventions and ideals, and tried to shake men out of their mental inertia. Fortunately, Shaw has the dramatic instinct as well, or audiences would never have endured the sermonizing. (Somerset Maugham shrewdly suggests another explanation of Shaw's popularity in

DRAMATIST

England—his unromantic treatment of love and sex. He asserts that the English people and Shaw's plays are equally undersexed. It is noteworthy that Shaw's plays are acted frequently in the Germanic, rarely in the Latin, countries of Europe.) Galsworthy, Monkhouse, Hankin, Elizabeth Baker, Houghton, Barker, and other realists attempted to combine surface realism with underlying honesty.

As William Archer often points out, the changes in English drama since Shakespeare have been inexorably in the direction of realism—in technique, dialogue, characterization, general plausibility. Such minor movements of Continental expressionism, the Irish poetic revival, and the bold use of the supernatural by Maeterlinck and Barrie have served to keep the dramatic form plastic, but have not checked the general movement towards realism. The realistic prose drama is as characteristic of our age as the poetical tragedy is of the time of Elizabeth, or the witty, salacious comedy of the time of Charles II. History suggests that its popularity may not endure, that it will be superseded by a new dramatic form. In this period of realistic prose drama Somerset Maugham has written more than a dozen plays that amused intelligent audiences over a period of nearly thirty years. Moreover he has made a distinctive contribution to twentieth century drama, and has

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

had many imitators. Scholars enjoy using the word "influence" when discussing imitation. It is perhaps the most respectable of euphemisms.

During his first sojourn in Heidelberg the young student became acquainted with the new German drama, which responded sooner and more vigorously to the Ibsen influence than did the English drama. He saw the provocative new plays of Sudermann and Hauptmann, as well as those of Ibsen, performed in the dingy, ill-lighted, and ill-ventilated theatre in Heidelberg, but to him and his boyish comrades it was a hall of enchantment. Over their beer afterwards they debated with vehemence the meaning of the plays. Once in Munich he saw Ibsen in the flesh—drinking beer. He viewed the drama very respectfully, even solemnly. When he entered St. Thomas's he wrote a number of short plays, some of which he tried to market, but all of which were consigned eventually to his waste basket. He discovered that an unknown playwright had little chance of having a play performed. During the middle part of the nineteenth century lax copyright provisions and the superfluity of adaptable French plays exasperated English playwrights. Finally a group of native writers forced their way into the theatre—Jones, Pinero, Grundy, Byron, Wills, Carton, Gilbert—and were successful; but they were

DRAMATIST

also prolific, and managers were disinclined to take chances on the work of unknowns. He determined to make his reputation in fiction and then effect an entrance into the charmed circle. He wrote *Liza of Lambeth* and *The Making of a Saint*, which attracted some attention. He then wrote his first long play, *A Man of Honour*, but it was refused by half a dozen managers. He continued with fiction, and wrote *Orientations*, *The Hero*, and *Mrs. Craddock*. The Stage Society came to his rescue and gave his play two performances at the Imperial Theatre on February 23 and 24, 1903.



THE Stage Society, encouraged by the brave work of J. T. Grein's Independent Theatre, founded in 1891, was the pioneer among the many producing societies, which have done invaluable service to the modern drama by performing foreign plays, bold new English plays with little commercial promise, and plays not licensed by a timid censor for public performance. These plays, of course, are performed only before members of the societies, but they are reviewed by the regular newspaper dramatic critics and are visited by hopeful managers. The Stage Society

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

provides a memorable date in the history of the modern drama with its first production in 1899, Shaw's *You Never Can Tell*. In 1904 the new drama was greatly spurred by the inauguration of the Védrinne and Granville-Barker productions at the Court Theatre. Within three years they produced plays by Shaw, Galsworthy, Barker, Hankin, Yeats, Masefield, Hauptmann, Schnitzler—plays that no West End manager would risk. A nucleus of intelligent play-goers was formed, and has never ceased growing. Although Somerset Maugham is amused by the dreadful seriousness with which the Stage Society took itself, he has always been grateful to it for producing his play.

A Man of Honour is a dramatization of one thread of the plot of *The Merry-go-Round*. Basil Kent becomes infatuated with a barmaid, Jenny Bush, and against the advice of friends marries her when she discovers that she is pregnant. They are completely unsuited, and misery results. Jenny is coarse, uneducated, jealous, but sincere in her love for Basil. He is a gentleman, and is repelled by her vulgarity and tormented by her sponging relatives. She becomes desperately jealous of Basil and Hilda Murray and commits suicide. At the end, Basil says to a friend that if he had acted like a blackguard—as ninety-nine men out of a hundred would have done—and

DRAMATIST

let Jenny go to the dogs, he should have remained happy and contented and prosperous. And she, perhaps, wouldn't have died. It's because he tried to do his duty and act like a gentleman and a man of honour that all this misery came about. This view is cynical and provocative, but the play has an even greater shock before the final curtain: the hero confesses that he is relieved by Jenny's death, and that he will now marry Hilda Murray. It is not strange that the audience was disconcerted by this ending, and that no commercial theatre would consider producing the grim play.

Conservative critics condemned it whole-heartedly. "Exactly the kind of play to comfort the members of the Stage Society . . . painful, pessimistic, squalid . . . satire grim and relentless enough for Swift; its gloom is that of a long Scandinavian night penetrable by no star . . . ends in a savage sneer." Highbrow critics found much to praise and assured the young author that he was a promising dramatist. Other productions of the Stage Society that season were *When the Dead Awaken*, *The Two Mr. Wetherbys*, *The Vikings*, *The Good Hope*, and *The Admirable Bashville*. *A Man of Honour* received more recognition than was usually accorded to works belonging to the repertory of the Stage Society, and a year later was put on for a two weeks' run at the

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

Avenue Theatre. In the original cast were four actors destined to become famous: Dennis Eadie, O. B. Clarence, Nigel Playfair, and Granville-Barker.

The author has not seen a copy of the play for twenty-five years, and he would have difficulty today in finding those elements he once considered high-brow. He was yet to learn stage-craft and that his own wit would suit him better than Oscar Wilde's. The wit is laboured, but not always bad. Some of the epigrams must have made Stage Society Members feel pleasantly superior. From the rehearsals Somerset Maugham learned much about stagecraft, and he received a solemn blessing from the intelligentsia; but the play actually did him harm: managers were sceptical of authors sponsored by the Stage Society. Mr. Maugham has an amusing paragraph in the Preface to the first volume of his collected plays:

"I felt a trifle flat after the production of *A Man of Honour*. I looked reflectively at the Thames and was conscious that I had not set it on fire. I badly wanted to write plays that would be seen not only by a handful of people. I wanted money and I wanted fame. But it was not without misgiving that I turned to comedy. I knew that the drama could only regain its proper place in the literary life of the time and be of serious import to intelligent men if it dealt in a sincere spirit with life.

DRAMATIST

In my day we meant by this prostitution. We were willing, it is true, to consider adultery if the consequences were harrowing; but we had no patience with the quality and were interested in the proletariat only if it was vicious or starving; it was the middle class with its smug respectability and shameful secrets that offered us our best chance to be grim, ironical, sordid and tragic. We were not gay, life was too grave for that; we were not light, our admiration for Ibsen had taught us to leave that to the French . . . Sometimes when I have been invited to a party in Chelsea and listened to the conversation of the cultured young I have wondered if it ever occurs to them that in our day we were just as silly as they."

This is a delicious account of his one brief alliance with the dismal intelligentsia of his day.



DURING the run of *The Man of Honour* at the Avenue Theatre *Mademoiselle Zampa*, a one-act farce by Somerset Maugham, served as a curtain raiser. It has been described as a fairly amusing presentation of the manner in which, by appeals to vanity and arousing of jealousy, a temperamental ballerina

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

is persuaded to resume a part she had given up in a fit of temper. The play has never been published.



His rationalism and sense of humour soon won him away from the art for art's sake pose. He yearned for success and wealth, both of which the intellectuals professed to despise. He had confidence in himself. A year earlier a one-act play which he had written in German had been performed in Berlin, and he could not help seeing that audiences liked it. This play is *Schiffbrüchig*, (*Shipwrecked*), which the author translated and published in *The Venture* (1903) as *Marriages are Made in Heaven*. The play is not without the characteristic touches that were to distinguish his later plays. The theme and ending are shocking: a gentleman marries a woman with a shady past, the ex-mistress of a nobleman who still allows her £1200 a year; the bridegroom knows her story, loves her, has no scruples about the handsome allowance, and the play ends with the prospect of a happy marriage. It is an unsentimental version of *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*. The young author noted that audiences laughed at such anaemic epigrams as, "Illusions are like umbrellas. You no sooner get them than you lose them." He also dis-

DRAMATIST

covered that the attempts at humor in *A Man of Honour* were not wasted. He determined to write a comedy.

He wrote *Loaves and Fishes*, and in it directed a bit of satire at the intellectual drama:

RAILING: . . . He wouldn't go and see a play unless he was sure it would make him laugh.

WINNIE: I rather like being amused at the theatre myself.

RAILING: Oh, we'll get you out of that. The drama is destined to something more than to entertain.

But no manager would consider producing the play, because its principal character, a bishop, is represented as pompous and worldly. The author realized that managers as well as audiences must be kept in mind, and he shrewdly considered the actors as well. He would write a part that a glamorous actress would like to play and thus make sure of the production of the comedy. He surrendered entirely to public taste and included in the characterization everything he could think of that would please audience and actress: he gave her a title, he made her an adventuress but safely this side actual turpitude, he gave her charm and wit. But he still had something to learn: in one scene the actress had to have her hair done (a tremendous rite in 1904) and her cosmetics applied. No actress would consider the part. But George Tyler bought the play and

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

asked the playwright to insert some more epigrams, which were then fashionable. He determined to write another play with nothing objectionable, but managers refused *Mrs. Dot* because it lacked action. Changing his tactics, he composed a play designed to attract a leading man. "I employed the same method, merely changing the sex of my principal character, and wrote *Jack Straw*." But before he began making the rounds of managers with *Jack Straw*, *Lady Frederick* was produced at the Court Theatre with the popular actress Ethel Irving in the title role and was a great success. It ran for more than a year.



Lady Frederick was the first of a dozen high comedies by Somerset Maugham which were destined to make this dramatic form one of the glories of the modern English theatre. The high comedy or comedy of manners or, as Mr. Maugham calls it, artificial comedy, has a long history in England. It is, as the various names imply, a comedy usually dealing with characteristics rather than character, with the surfaces of polite society rather than with serious problems and intrigue, depending more on sparkle and wit than on comic situation. Its char-

DRAMATIST

acters are of the well-to-do class with leisure, culture, and money, more concerned with repartee than with middle-class morality. Its muse is the comic spirit of Meredith's classic essay, and it tries to steer the comedy safely by the shoals of sentiment. The humor and excitement of the artificial comedy are more intellectual than emotional. It flourishes best in periods of relative prosperity and peace, when people can relax, even be flippant, with safety, and direct healthy, astringent laughter at themselves. The comedy of manners is rare in its pure form, but its elements are often discovered in other dramatic types. It appears in the Benedict-Beatrice scenes in *Much Ado About Nothing*. It is to be found occasionally in the comedies of Ben Jonson when he relaxes his ponderous humors. It reaches a nearly perfect form in the comedies of the Restoration period, which almost completely banish emotion and seriousness. Congreve's *Love for Love* is perhaps the happiest example of the Restoration high comedy. It yielded to sentimental comedy for three-quarters of a century before it brilliantly reappeared in *The Critic* and *The School for Scandal* by Sheridan. The English stage then succumbed to a century of darkness, so dark that the feeble star of Bulwer-Lytton is visible in it. When Jones, Pinero, Wilde, and Shaw ushered in the great dramatic revival at the end of the century, the comedy of man-

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

ners was born again. Oscar Wilde combined it with melodrama in three plays. In the 1890's Jones used it most successfully through four-fifths of *The Case of Rebellious Susan* and *The Liars*, but at the end of each play surrendered to Victorian (and his own) prejudice, and the comedy was drowned in sentiment. But the spadework was done, and younger playwrights were ready. St. John Hankin fused it with an acid satire; Shaw used it as relief from the polemics in his excellent early comedies; H. H. Davies, Somerset Maugham, Stanley Houghton, and Haddon Chambers salted their comedies with it. Immediately after the war the relaxing of moral codes and a general spirit of disillusion favoured the continued success of the form, and further comedies by Somerset Maugham, Frederick Lonsdale, and Noel Coward strengthened its popularity. Since 1930 the artificial comedy in England has been eclipsed by the domestic comedy of realism, biographical and period plays, and gritty importations from America. Strangely enough, in America, which wise men have always said could never produce high comedy, Philip Barry, S. N. Behrman, and others have produced high comedy as authentic to New York as Lonsdale's is to London. In general, however, comedy other than farce is moving toward a greater sincerity without yielding to sentimentality. The simple, charming comedies of Charles Vildrac

DRAMATIST

and Dodie Smith are perhaps indicative of the trend.

Somerset Maugham was as well acquainted with the upper stratum of smart society which serves as the background and stuff of artificial comedy as Congreve, Sheridan, and Henry Arthur Jones had been in their time. His family was of the well-to-do professional class, and he grew up without exalted notions of the superiority of the upper classes. He was early impressed by what he bluntly terms the stupidity of the aristocracy and landed gentry. He came to the conclusion that there is not much to choose between men. They are all a mixture of greatness and meanness, "virtue and vice, nobility and baseness." Some become eminent because of unusual strength of character, opportunity, or unscrupulousness, but they remain potentially much the same.

The surfaces of life differ, however, and it is with the glittering surface of life in Mayfair and its hot-house folk that his comedies deal. After his moderate success with a half-dozen novels he was much feted by celebrity hunters among the aristocracy, and invited to luncheons, balls, dinners, and country weekends. From the beginning he was a detached spectator rather than a member of this society, for he has never been a social person, and is bored by convivial amusement. When his plays brought him money, he purchased a house in Mayfair and came

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

to know the society even better. No ascetic, he enjoyed the luxuries of the new life, and studied with amusement the *fauna Mayfairensis*. A genuine cosmopolitan he knew, too, fashionable society in Paris, the Riviera, New York. Jealous of his independence and painfully shy, he was in society but not of it, and his long journeys to far parts of the earth enabled him to see it in a proper perspective.

In *Lady Frederick* there is no surrender to sentimentality. The lively, witty characters preserve their brilliant hardness—and unreality—to the end as inflexibly as do the shady folk of Wycherley's comedies. Lady Frederick's world is as unreal as Millamant's, and audience and reader are untouched by the fortunes or misfortunes of either flashing heroine. Comedy arises from satire and wit, both of which reveal the strong "influence" of Oscar Wilde. Many of the lines might have been written by Wilde himself:

"I confess I prefer people to say horrid things of me only behind my back. Especially if they are true."

MERESTON: And at last she promised to go away with you. You were to meet at Waterloo Station.

FOULDES: Such a draughty place for an assignation.

"You show no respect for my dyed hairs, young man . . ."

DRAMATIST

"There's no one so transparent as the person who thinks he's devilish deep."

ROSE: But won't Gerald grow very dull if he behaves himself?

LADY FREDERICK: I have no doubt of it. But dullness is the first requisite of a good husband.

"Your deceased husband, being a strictly religious man, made a point of believing the worst about his neighbours."

LADY MERESTON: I wish I knew how she manages to dress so beautifully. It's one of the injustices of fate that clothes only hang on a woman really well when she's lost every shred of reputation.

FOULDES: My dear, you must console yourself with the thought that she'll probably frizzle for it hereafter.

LADY FREDERICK: I hope I'm not wicked, Paradine, but to wear draperies and wings in the next world offers me no compensation for looking dowdy in a Paquin gown in this.

This is the wit and repartee of a by-gone generation, not always spoken in character, sometimes obviously extrinsic; but it is as authentic in the London theatre of 1907 as was the wit of Congreve and Sheridan in the playhouses of their day.

ON MARCH 20, 1908, *Jack Straw* was produced at the Vaudeville Theatre with Charles Hawtrey, Lotte Venne, and Louis Goodrich in the cast. The author correctly classifies *Jack Straw* (a modern treatment of the plot of *The Lady of Lyons*) as a farce, but it is sharp with wit and satire. The butt of the satire is the Parker-Jennings family, who belong to the perennial stage type of title-worshipping, snobbish *nouveaux-riches*; nevertheless, according to theatrical convention the daughter of this impossible family is sweet and refined. The play has all the elements of the pre-war musical comedy—a reckless, handsome, young archduke masquerading as a waiter, the lush background of the Grand Babylon Hotel, and the romantic love story, which sentimental ballads would have accommodated better than the playwright's salty lines. This was the play Somerset Maugham was determined to make palatable to manager, actor, and audience. One is not surprised to learn that he felt with some uneasiness while writing it that he was overworking the banal.

The play rises above the level of most farces in the measure of credibility given to the characters and events, whereas the spirit of the comedy remains unflaggingly farcical. The repartee and satire are ele-

DRAMATIST

ments of high comedy that blend well enough with the plot. One is still reminded of Oscar Wilde at moments:

LADY WANLEY: My dear, do you never say anything against any one?

ROSE: Seldom. Everybody's so nice.

LADY WANLEY: It must make conversation very difficult.

But there are occasional flashes of a humor of a different sort:

PARKER-JENNINGS: I was only being facetious, my dear.

MRS. PARKER-JENNINGS: I should 'ave thought you'd learned by now that it's vulgar to be funny. You've never 'eard a duchess make a joke, 'ave you?

Jack Straw enjoyed a long run, and was also successful in America, where John Drew played the leading role. There is no reason why it should not enjoy a long run at the Aldwych in 1940, if the slang and jokes were modernized, and an aeroplane, television, and a communist introduced into the plot.



ON APRIL 26, 1908, *Mrs. Dot* (originally entitled *Worthley's Entire*) was produced at the Comedy Theatre, with a popular cast headed by Marie

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

Tempest, Fred Kerr, and Marie Illington. In America Billie Burke played Mrs. Dot, and after the New York run took the play on a long tour. It was a made-to-order role for both Marie Tempest and Billie Burke: both excelled in parts demanding sudden squalls of passion, infectious laughter, and tremendous energy. The author calls the play a farce, as it in effect is; but it bares its teeth occasionally, especially in some of the acrid tirades, which give a foretaste of the bitterness in the plays to come. A cynical bachelor is introduced, and his wry comments on women and marriage go far beyond the legitimate needs of a farce. Audiences were perceptibly chilled by one long harangue in which he piles up evidence of the ferocity of the so-called *gentle* sex, but the speech was not removed from the play. There is more of the author's own humor and less of Oscar Wilde's.

As early as 1908 Somerset Maugham was being accused of cynicism. He was tagged "cynic" and like Mark Twain, Bernard Shaw, and Noel Coward has had difficulty in living down a pat descriptive term. It is quite possible that he had himself in mind in a passage in *Mrs. Dot* in which a character accused of cynicism declares that most people are so unused to the truth that they mistake it for cynicism.

Although Mrs. Dot herself is a fresh and novel character, and much of the sharp humor is original,

DRAMATIST

the young playwright is not yet standing entirely on his own feet. The play constantly reminds one of other plays. It begins like *The Importance of Being Earnest* with flippant small talk in a bachelor's chambers. The valet reminds one of William in *You Never Can Tell*. There is a manufactured love intrigue exactly like that between Beatrice and Benedict in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Mrs. Dot uses the tactics of the Comtesse de la Brière in *What Every Woman Knows* to weary a young couple into breaking their engagement. There is no hint, however, of plagiarism; the author is still feeling his way towards complete confidence in his own type of humor and dramatic devices—towards originality.



WHILE *Lady Frederick*, *Jack Straw*, and *Mrs. Dot* were still running, *The Explorer* was produced at the Lyric on June 13, 1908. This dramatization of his novel by the same name added nothing to his reputation, but the playwright profited from its composition. The craftsmanship shows improvement over that of the earlier plays, and Somerset Maugham learned that emotional insincerity cannot be concealed. The whole drama is built on a substructure that collapses at the first touch of analysis. The type

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

of play was out of date, and the central theme (the martyrdom of a man wrongly accused—he could save his reputation only by destroying his sweetheart's golden opinion of a worthless relative) was common in melodrama. The author was well aware of the play's insincerity and theatricality, but the phenomenal success of his three comedies resulted in an attractive offer for *The Explorer* which he was not inclined to refuse. In the excellent cast were Lewis Waller, A. E. George, Eva Moore, and Evelyn Millard. He does not include *The Explorer* in his collected works.



His next play shows a sharp improvement, a greater cleverness in technique, a genuine comic note without resort to farce, and a reasonable theme, convincingly developed. *Penelope*, originally entitled *Man and Wife*, was produced by Charles Frohman at the Comedy Theatre on January 9, 1909, with Marie Tempest, Kate Bishop, and Alfred Bishop in the cast. In New York Penelope was played by Ethel Barrymore, and after the London run Marie Tempest gave America an opportunity of comparing the two popular comediennes in the role. The play was not only popular but fashionable. Queen Alexandra attended,

DRAMATIST

and the Comedy rivalled the Criterion as the smart theatre of the day. With the production of *Penelope*, the most joyous of his comedies, Somerset Maugham was at the peak of his success as a fashionable playwright. The stygic humor of the later comedies was not designed to please tired débutantes and their mamas.

Penelope is a product of the balmy days of play-writing when marital infidelity still served as a framework for artificial comedy. But even in 1909 the subject was hackneyed; a hundred comedies from *The Case of Rebellious Susan* to *What Every Woman Knows* had displayed the manoeuvres of a wife to win back an erring husband. *Penelope* triumphs over its handicap by the charm of its heroine, and by the gaiety and nimbleness of its wit. It is the only one of Mr. Maugham's pre-war plays that could be revived; in fact, it was acted in Berlin after the war and enjoyed a long run. Because of language and allusions, however, it would have to be a costume play. The technique is flawless, from the unusual beginning to the surprising last line. As the asinine husband (a stock character in the older comedy of manners) is a physician, he conducts his infidelity with apparent safety, but Penelope discovers everything. In spite of her distress the comic note is maintained, and even her tears are tears of vexation, not of anguish. The briskness and hilarity of the comedy render in-

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

nocuous much of the pointedness of the wit, but many lines give a slight foretaste of the acerbity of *Our Betters* and *The Constant Wife*.

PENELOPE: But I've been a perfect angel. I've simply worshipped the ground he walked on. I've loved him as no man was ever loved before.

GOLIGHTLY: No man could stand it . . . He's never been able to escape from your love.

PENELOPE: But, oh, father, why can't we go back to the beginning when we loved one another without a thought of wisdom or prudence? That was the real love. Why couldn't it last?

GOLIGHTLY: Because you and Dickie are man and woman, my dear.

DICKIE: I was feeling awfully conscience-stricken.

PENELOPE: That's where women have such an advantage over men. Their conscience never strikes them till they've lost their figure and their complexion.

MRS. FERGUSON: I feel such a perfect fool.

PENELOPE: It's so tiresome of our little sins to look foolish when they're found out, instead of wicked.

The author has not yet outgrown his predilection for the epigram, which he has described as looping the loop on a commonplace and coming down between the lines.

"If a man falls in love with a pretty woman, he falls out of it. But if he falls in love with a plain one, he'll be in love with her all his life."

DRAMATIST

"If it weren't for patent medicines and the hypochondriacs, half the doctors in London would starve."

"A wise woman never lets her husband be quite sure of her. The moment he is, Cupid puts on a top hat and becomes a churchwarden."

Penelope is a brilliant example of the early twentieth century drawing-room comedy. It is sparkling and sophisticated, drifts as near impropriety as the rigid decorum of the era permitted, is studded with epigrams, and arouses no uneasiness by treating with any seriousness the problems implied in the theme. Mr. Maugham has said repeatedly that the object of drama is delight, and its aim is pleasure, not instruction. *Penelope* is exactly the type of comedy which pleased intelligent audiences in 1909.



His next venture in playwriting was an adaptation of an early French farce, which was produced under the title *The Noble Spaniard* at the Royalty Theatre in March, 1909. The excellent cast, which included Charles Hawtrey and Kate Cutler, was unable to persuade the audiences to abrogate common sense and accept the fantastic story. Fortunately the play was not a success, and the author was not drawn

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

away from original work to the usually thankless and wearisome work of adaptation. *The Noble Spaniard* has never been published.



ON SEPTEMBER 30, 1909, *Smith* was produced at the Comedy Theatre with Marie Löhr, Kate Cutler, A. E. Mathews, and Robert Loraine in the cast. Although a comedy, *Smith* is far more serious than *Penelope*; its humor is caustic and the dramatist turns upon and flays the society which appears merely charmingly trivial in *Penelope* and *Lady Frederick*. Comfortably well-off, at the age of thirty-five he could afford to risk displeasing audiences. He had the normal person's pleasure in shocking, but even more the realist's satisfaction in truth-telling. The story concerns Tom Freeman, a strenuous young Englishman who has by hard work made a success of farming in South Africa, and who returns to England to find a suitable bride. His sister's friends, who spend their time playing bridge and philandering, are not only unsuitable but disgusting to him. He finally proposes to the only sensible, wholesome, warm-blooded woman he has seen in England—Smith, his sister's parlourmaid. One must recall the cast-iron class distinctions of the period to appreciate the boldness of

DRAMATIST

the play. A few months before, Pinero in *Mid-Channel* had depicted the same type of worthless modern woman who misses happiness in a feverish quest for pleasure; but he did not suggest that the hope of eugenics is to be found in the servant's hall rather than the drawing-room.

At one scene in the play the audiences expressed audibly their shocked, half-indignant surprise. A frivolous woman, bored with matrimony and the fuss occasioned by illness in the nursery, spends the day shopping and playing bridge. While she is playing cards, a telephone message reaches her that the baby has died, and that her husband has tried all day to find her. The scene is perhaps too violent for a comedy; "an axe is not needed to demolish a house of cards." Likewise the semi-reformation of a frustrated spinster is dangerously near the sentimental for Somerset Maugham. But the flavor of satirical humor is for the most part preserved, and the scenes between Tom and Smith are positively jovial. The popularity of the play (it, too, ran a year) resulted partly from its novelty, and partly from the refusal of audiences to accept it as a serious play. The central situation—the serious wooing of a parlourmaid by a man of family and wealth—was to them fantastically improbable. It was a theme for farce; hence the outcry over the incident of the baby's death. Priggish comments in the *Athenaeum* expressed the senti-

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

ments of many: "It is questionable taste to show a servant girl made love to in her mistress's house by her mistress's brother. Is it fair to get fun in this way? Was it necessary to choose a domestic servant so conspicuously to be the foil of the sinners she serves? The world may need the harsh things he says of it, but is not the desire to say clever things just a bit too strong in Mr. Maugham's nature?"

The author's skill in repartee improves with his forswearance of epigrams and merely flashy *bon mots*. Such dialogue as in the following scene exhibits already the characteristically dry humor of his later books.

(Emily, who has gone out of the room to arrange her veil, is the topic of conversation.)

ROSE: She's thirty-two if she's a day, and my impression is that she'd accept a chimney-sweep if he asked her.

MRS. OTTO: I suppose she's a great friend of yours, isn't she?

ROSE: Oh, yes. I'm devoted to her . . . of course, we all know she hasn't a farthing.

ALGY: Personally I think she plays bridge a great deal too well.

ROSE: I only ask her if I can't get anyone else to make a fourth. She always wins, and I find it quite hard enough to pay for my own frocks; I don't want to pay for hers.

MRS. OTTO: She really dresses very nicely doesn't she?

DRAMATIST

ROSE: I often wonder if it's only on bridge that she does it.

ALGY: At all events, let us believe the worst about her.

[*Emily comes back.*]

EMILY: Well, have you been tearing my character to pieces?

ROSE: We haven't left you a shred, darling.

EMILY: I thought not. I felt I must choose between my veil and my character when I left you.

ROSE: You wisely chose the more important.

Occasionally the dialogue is too stinging for pure comedy:

FREEMAN: With decent, normal people, friendship between the sexes is impossible. It either leads on to love or it follows it.

DALLAS (*Vexed*): Rose knows quite well how to take care of herself. After all I know her better than you do, I suppose. She's my wife . . . She's not at all the sort of woman to do anything silly. She takes no interest in love and that kind of nonsense.

FREEMAN: Surely she has her five senses like other women?

DALLAS: Of course she has her five senses, but they're spiritualized. They're . . . You're so coarse.

FREEMAN: My dear fellow, in that case I'd much sooner they committed adultery . . . It's far better to be decent normal people and break every commandment in the Decalogue than the

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

monsters you represent them. They must be beneath apes.

Before Freeman leaves, he tells his sister and his friends what he thinks of them:

"At first when I came home I was frankly horrified. I thought I'd fallen into a perfect sink of iniquity . . . It took me some time to discover that you weren't real people at all. You're not men and women, but strange sexless creatures, without blood in your veins . . . you're too trifling to be wicked. Your only vice is cigarette-smoking, your only passion is bridge. You want nothing very much except to be amused, and boredom eats into your bones. In yourselves you're perfectly unimportant, but England is full of people as flippant and frivolous and inane as yourselves."

One is justified in suspecting that Freeman is the author's mouthpiece, and it is interesting to note that Freeman's conception of the pattern of a good life and a successful marriage is that of Philip Carey's at the end of *Of Human Bondage*.



For several years after *Smith* and *Penelope* there is a distinct falling off in the quality of his plays. *The Tenth Man*, *Grace*, *Loaves and Fishes*, and even *The*

DRAMATIST

Land of Promise seem less spontaneous, more machine-made in the popular manner of Henri Bernstein. During these years Somerset Maugham was caught in the vicious and tiresome circle of Mayfair society, and although dissatisfied with the showiness and emptiness of the life, he was not to extricate himself until the outbreak of the World War. During the years immediately preceding the war, when he was absorbed in writing *Of Human Bondage*, he became less interested in supplying popular comedies for the fashionable West-End theatres. He had reached a dead-end and needed new scenes, new patterns of life to fire his imagination again.

He does not consider either of his two plays of 1910 worth preserving. When one reads *The Tenth Man* and *Grace* (also called *Landed Gentry*) today, he feels that either play would provide a popular film story, "a programme picture." They have the proper mixture of melodrama, sentiment, humor, suspense and violence of popular film drama. *The Tenth Man* was produced on February 24, 1910, with Arthur Bourchier, A. E. George, and Godfrey Tearle in the cast. It is the story of a ruthless Napoleon of finance who crushes his competitors, betrays his friends, and begrimes his family to triumph over difficulties, many of them the result of his own vices. But he fails to take into account the tenth man (nine out

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

of ten men have their price) and he is eventually confounded when he has to deal with a character as strong as his own; power and unscrupulousness wilt before indomitable decency and sense of honor. The atmosphere of the play was distinctly modern for 1910, but the melodrama rings false today. The early part of the play is especially artificial; but the last act is still powerful, and the terrific irony of the ending deserves to bring down the curtain on a really great drama.



His other play of 1909 is a dramatization of one of the several threads of plot in *The Merry-go-Round*. *Grace* was produced at the Duke of York's Theatre on October 15, 1910, with a cast of favorites including Dennis Eadie, Leslie Faber, Edmund Gwenn, Irene Van Brugh, Lady Tree, and Lillah MacCarthy. The play was published under the satiric title of *Landed Gentry*. Somerset Maugham has never written a downright dull story or play, and *Grace* interests us even when it fails to convince. It is a serious play, the climax of which results from the suicide of a minor character. But to the reader as to audiences in 1910 it is weak because there is no heart in it. The play pictures the appalling snobbishness of the landed

DRAMATIST

gentry of the time, their inhuman self-righteousness and intolerance. The matriarch of the Insoley family is almost indistinguishable from the Marquise in *Caste*, except in her bitter humor. In this family possessed of cast-iron opinions and virtue, Grace, from the middle classes, is repelled by their narrow ideas and bored by her priggish husband. The play, with little conviction, shows the transformation of her dislike of her husband into sincere love for him. She is a puppet of the playwright, not a living character of the dramatist's imagination. Audiences were justified in suspecting that the author was "pulling their leg." He has too much sense of humor and aesthetic sense of proportion to write a melodrama, and he fails when attempting to depict emotional attitudes beyond his sympathetic understanding. One feels that he might have composed a racy satiric comedy out of the material, somewhat in the manner of *Our Betters*.

He is sincere, however, in expressing and defending ethical behavior of the heroine opposed to all tradition of the landed gentry. Near the end of the play when Grace discovers that she really loves her priggish husband, she is urged by her masochistic conscience and by her puritanical brother-in-law to confess to her husband that she has committed adultery. "I don't see how there can be forgiveness

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

till one has confessed one's sin," says the clergyman. But a disillusioned and nimble-minded spinster retorts: "You still look upon your God as a God of vengeance, who wants sacrifices to appease Him."

ARCHIBALD: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive our sins."

MISS VERNON: That was said to a stiff-necked generation that wanted humbling. But no one can want to humble us, surely. We're so timid already . . . so unsure of ourselves. We've all got a morbid desire to unbosom ourselves . . . Confession's like a drug we fly to because we've lost the last shadow of our self-reliance.

GRACE: I know that it's my only chance of happiness.

MISS VERNON: No one knows why we've been brought into the world, but it evidently wasn't for our happiness. Or if it was, the Being who put us here has made a most outrageous mess out of it. Put your happiness out of the question.

ARCHIBALD: If the sinner repents, let him confess his sin. That's the only proof he can give of a contrite spirit.

MISS VERNON: Nonsense. He can give a much more sensible proof by acting differently in the future.

Miss Vernon persuades her to forego the delicious luxury of confession, and let her husband be happy in his delusions. It is the ethic of *The Wild Duck* rather than of *The Enemy of the People*.

DRAMATIST

MISS VERNON: My dear, there are three good rules in life. The first is never sin; and that's the most sensible. The second is—if you sin, never repent; and that's the bravest. But the third is—if you repent, never, never confess; and that's the hardest of them all.

The author is most convincing when his characters reflect his intelligence, or when they reflect his own emotional experience, as does Philip Carey. He is least persuasive when as in *The Explorer* and *Landed Gentry* he forces his puppets to express sentiments and feel emotions beyond his rational comprehension.



MENTION has been made of an early play which had been rejected because it was feared that its central character, a pompous, egotistical bishop, would offend the sensitive public. In 1906 when pressed for money he had novelised the play as *The Bishop's Apron*. By 1911 it was felt that the growing tolerance in matters of church and religion would permit the production of *Loaves and Fishes*, and the play was first performed at the Duke of York's Theatre on February 24, 1911. In the cast were C. V. France, Athole Stewart, and Robert Loraine. Since

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

both *Grace* and *The Tenth Man* had been termed "indecent" it is not to be wondered at that *Loaves and Fishes* was attacked for irreverence. The critics' objections remind one of the vilifications heaped upon Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*. That *Loaves and Fishes* is a bad play because no good bishop would behave like Canon Spratte was the gist of the illogical criticism. The play, which was performed ten years too soon, is by no means without merit. There is considerable wit, some lively satire, clever portraiture; plot interest is provided by the bishop's ambitions, and by a parental intrigue to avert an inept marriage, a device used later with effect in *The Cassilis Engagement*. (*Loaves and Fishes* was written before *The Cassilis Engagement*, although performed four years later.) There is much wit in the manner of Oscar Wilde—e.g., "The *Peerage* is my favorite work of fiction"; but many lines are more original, such as the Bishop's remark, "In these socialistic days I look upon it as an affectation to make my own jokes." The audience was not only pained by the worldliness of the bishop but puzzled by a comedy that offered in its *dramatis personae* no prepossessing characters: the bishop is a humbug, the heroine is feckless and useless, her accepted lover a humorless prig, and her rejected lover an absurd fanatic. Comedies with no agreeable or charming

DRAMATIST

characters had little chance for success in those halcyon days.



DURING 1912 he was at work on *Of Human Bondage*. In 1913 his adaptation of Molière's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* was produced on May 27 at His Majesty's Theatre. In the cast were Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, Philip Merivale, and Phyllis Neilson-Terry. Strauss wrote original music for the opera-interlude, "Ariadne in Naxos," which was produced by Thomas Beecham.



HE HAD a great success in 1914 with *The Land of Promise*, first performed at the Duke of York's Theatre on February 26 with Godfrey Tearle, C. V. France, Athole Stewart, and Irene Vanbrugh. It played to crowded houses until the outbreak of the World War in August. One theme of the play is similar to that of *Smith*: a happy marriage is possible in spite of wide differences in social position of man and wife; but in *The Land of Promise*, it is the woman who marries into a lower class. The

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

play was suggested to Somerset Maugham by Charles Frohman, who wanted a modern play on the theme of *The Taming of the Shrew*. The author writes in the Preface to the play: "I thought the idea a good one. An aunt of mine had once had a companion who left her to live with her brother on his farm in Canada and I well remember the shock it caused my elderly relative when her former companion ('very well connected, my dear') wrote and told her that she had married one of the hired men. Here was a story to fit the theme." The play was topical because of the emigration to Canada; the theme of inter-class marriage was more exciting before the war than after, and the domestic battle for supremacy is of perennial interest. Although Mr. Maugham is not a "playwright of ideas," *The Land of Promise*, as well as *Smith*, suggests that artificial social barriers must give way before intelligence and character.

The first act, which serves as a prologue, shows the heroine, Norah, lady-like but destitute in Tunbridge Wells—the perfect setting for her impoverished gentility. The scene of the rest of the play is in Canada, where her brother has emigrated and taken up a farm. He has married an illiterate waitress, whose jealousy and vicious manners drive Norah into an impulsive marriage with an unedu-

DRAMATIST

cated farm-laborer. He not only tames her, but wins her love.

The play is more exciting than convincing. We cannot believe that Norah's brother would marry and continue to love and respect the vulgar and tawdry waitress. The hero is too patently a gentleman underneath his Petruchio bluster. We feel that the heroine is manicured and in high heels to the very last. But the play never flags in interest, and the wider social implications, although unobtrusive, give the play seriousness and dignity. The manner of life in Tunbridge Wells seems fantastic to Canadian farmers. Reggy, who was a charming man-about-town in London, is a useless bounder in the new world. *The Land of Promise*, like *The Admirable Crichton*, suggests more than it says; both plays show men and women unprotected by social convention, and thrust into combat with nature for survival. It has an epic quality that the author's drawing-room tea-table comedies lack. The author is justified in preferring *The Land of Promise* to most others of his plays. A consummate technician, he points out with proper pride the excellent construction of the second act, in which the characters of half a dozen people are revealed, their attitude towards one another are carefully suggested, and the incidents of the story follow one another with rapidity and cumulative excitement to the last line

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

of the act. Nevertheless, in spite of this plenty, there is no sense of crowding or compression. An aspiring playwright would do well to study the technique of this act; it would be worth more than a dozen textbooks on "Playwriting."



ALTHOUGH busy with war work and the preparation of *Of Human Bondage* for the press, Somerset Maugham did not neglect play-writing. His easy activities in the Intelligence Department afforded him leisure time for writing; moreover his sojourn in Geneva aroused the suspicions of the police, and he was forced to practise his profession as a writer. He wrote *Our Betters* early in 1915 in Rome, and *Caroline* in the autumn of the same year in Geneva. Although *Our Betters* was written in 1915, it wisely was not produced until after the war—and even then the Lord Chamberlain required certain modifications. (Among other things he banned the use of the word *slut*.) When the play was produced in 1923, the author was amused that critics, unaware that it had been written almost nine years before, pointed out with professional gravity various ways in which it showed development over earlier plays. *Our Betters*, perhaps the most brilliant artificial

DRAMATIST

comedy of our age, was produced during the same season when the Phoenix Society and the Lyric (Hammersmith) were reviving Congreve. Only the most obtuse failed to see that *Our Betters* is directly in line with the glittering comedies of manners of the Restoration. If there had been a corrupt court after the war, and if the theatre had served to amuse only the *beau monde*, Somerset Maugham could have been its favorite playwright had he so chosen; and he probably would not have chosen. The world of *Our Betters* is as far removed from most people's experience as is the world of *Love for Love*. It is the world of artificial high comedy. The author of *Our Betters* shows himself as witty as Congreve; and although Congreve is much praised for his style, his flowing periods would be as intolerable in modern comedy as would a plot so nearly undecipherable as that of *The Way of the World*. Somerset Maugham with *Our Betters* takes a place in the very front rank of writers of comedies of manners.

Our Betters was first performed in New York, where it created a minor sensation. It was produced in London at the Globe Theatre on September 11, 1923, and ran for more than a year. Its first run (578 performances) exceeded that of any other of the author's plays. Its excellent cast included Constance Collier, Marion Terry, and Reginald Owen. The satire and cynicism of the play, suggested by

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

the title, suited the post-war mood of disillusion; its hard, merciless wit and its absolute freedom from sentimentality pleased a new generation who felt themselves duped and cheated by their emotions. James Agate has suggested that *Our Betters* was a curse as well as a blessing, for it started an avalanche of lubricious plays by imitators who shared Mr. Maugham's brilliance but not his mentality. The most celebrated of these imitators (a blunt word which their admirers will resent) were Noel Coward, Frederick Lonsdale, and Michael Arlen, much of whose worst work concerns itself with the flippancies and dull amours of decadents and degenerates.

There are characters in *Our Betters* who are decadent and some who are perilously close to degenerate; but at no time does the play pretend to picture anything more than a tiny fragment of "society." There is no pretence that these people matter. Mr. Maugham merely puts under the microscope a group of American expatriates, people of wealth and a variety of hard brilliance and unmorality who have not escaped the danger of degeneracy which threatens the idle rich in an alien society. The author is not offended but amused by their cynicism, lack of conscience, opportunism, and well-mannered disoluteness. As a result the playgoer or reader is likewise not deeply shocked, for he is led to observe

DRAMATIST

the heartless, cynical heroine, the ridiculous, fatuous Duchess, the despicable spongers and loafers, not with revulsion but with a pleasant horror. If an immoral play is one that makes vice attractive, then *Our Betters* takes precedence over *Everyman* as a moral play. The author maintains a remorseless detachment throughout, which by no means indicates a callous lack of sympathy or understanding, but which gives an antiseptic cleanliness to the comedy. *Camille*, *Mid-Channel*, *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, *Declassée*, in spite of tragic endings, are sodden with bathos and imply an indulgence with wrong-doing that makes them more immoral than *Our Betters*. Although the strait-laced affected to be shocked by it, *Our Betters* is as relentlessly moral as *Mrs. Warren's Profession*. The two decent young Americans, who are minor characters, do not dull the hard polish of the comedy. The characters and situation offer numerous possibilities for tragedy or sentiment, but the play does not swerve from its comic course. It ends on a note of laughter not muffled by repentance or censure.

The fact that there are few quotable epigrams indicates the improvement in the dramatist's comic dialogue. The repartee is more brilliant than ever, but it fits the characters and situation and dims when removed from its context. When Clay, the snobbish opportunist, remarks, "Poor Flora, with

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

her good works! She takes to philanthropy as a drug to allay the pangs of unrequited love," we must know both Clay and Flora to appreciate the humor. When the Princess asks, "Has it ever occurred to you that snobbishness is the spirit of romance in a reach-me-down?" we feel that years of her own experience prompt the question; it is not merely a *bon mot* transferred from the playwright's notebook. For purposes of dramatic contrast, and not from any didactic motive, the cynical humor pauses occasionally for the commonsense comments of the two young Americans and Lord Bleane, who serve as an unobtrusive chorus. They do not seriously touch the comedy. *Our Betters* is cynical, satirical, and hard, but diverting and funny. The artificial comedy has gone in and out of fashion in the past and will go in and out of fashion in the future; but *Our Betters* will take its place as the finest example of the type in early twentieth century drama.



BEFORE *Caroline* was completed, the author's colleague at Lausanne was imprisoned by the Swiss authorities, and Somerset Maugham was afraid of a similar fate; he was not at all sure that he would be permitted to write if in prison. He hated the idea of

DRAMATIST

leaving the play unfinished, and he knew it would be very difficult to take it up again after a long interval. It was a great relief to him when he wrote the last line. He sent it to London and it was put into rehearsal at once. William Archer said of the play, "It might have been called 'The Unattainable.'" As a matter of fact, it was published under the title *The Unattainable*.

In its first version *Caroline* was largely a farce, the plot turning on the ancient device of mistaken identity. But in rehearsal the comedy seemed unsatisfactory and it was rewritten. The result is a modern comedy of humors, with each character dominated by one controlling quality or passion. It is frothy and artificial, a strange entertainment for the grave London of 1916. We must not forget however that *A Bit of Fluff*, a concoction accurately described by its title, ran throughout the war.

The theme is a familiar one—"the far-off hills are greenest." As long as Caroline is unobtainable, she and her suitors yearn for marriage; but when she finally becomes a widow and is eligible, there is a general decline in enthusiasm. The underlying psychology is sound as applied to the characters and their "humors," but the story lacks dramatic development and interest. The author himself points out that the play is finished by the end of the first act; but the remaining two acts are so enlivened by wit

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

and gaiety that the absence of plot is hardly noticeable, and some amusing secondary themes, droll and farcical, stretch out the play to conventional length.

Caroline, with no pretensions of probing human character or flaying the ills of society, was a welcome item for intelligent lovers of the theatre in 1916. Much nonsense has been written by superior people who frown upon the notion that the theatre is a means of escape. Sometimes its value lies in its capacity to obliterate our ego for two hours. A critic said of *Caroline*, "Mr. Somerset Maugham in defiance of war economy has opened a bottle of champagne." *Caroline*, with no hint of war and its agonies, probably did as much for "morale" (as the word was somewhat vaguely used in wartime) as did the more obvious devices of official propaganda. Irene Vanbrugh played the title role in London, and Margaret Anglin in New York. There was a successful revival of the comedy in 1926 with Lilian Braithwaite, Athene Seyler, and C. Aubrey Smith. It is hardly probable that the play could be revived again unless it is carefully modernised. The first appearance of Rex dressed in long motor coat and motor cap for a drive around Regent's Park would convulse the audience in a way unanticipated by the author. Much of the dialogue harmonises with the motoring outfit. No one knows better than Somerset

DRAMATIST

Maugham that almost all prose plays are not even of an age; they are of a season or two.



Love in a Cottage, which was produced on January 27, 1918, with Marie Löhr and Haidee Wright in the cast, is mentioned here merely to make complete the list of Somerset Maugham's plays. It deals with a group of wastrels living on Lake Como, and attempts to depict the harrowing and demoralising effects of life at the Italian resort upon these trivial people. The author was so little interested in the play that he allowed what is dangerously like a moral to creep in! The play has not been published.



Caesar's Wife (a good title) was first performed at the Royalty Theatre on March 27, 1919; in the excellent cast were C. Aubrey Smith, Fay Compton, Eva Moore, Helen Haye, and V. Sutton Vane. In America, Billie Burke played the title rôle. *Caesar's Wife* was suggested to the author by the most widely read seventeenth century novel, *La Princesse de Clèves* by Madame de Lafayette. It was an early

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

psychological novel with a situation used a thousand times since—a woman finds love after her marriage, and for a man other than her husband. Of course what interested Somerset Maugham was not the hackneyed situation, but the delicate subtlety of the novelist in depicting the wife battling her passion and the husband battling his jealousy. Also, a bit piqued by the reproach that he wrote only about unpleasant people, he experimented with a play in which all the characters are unobjectionable. "I thought it possible to devise a piece in which the persons were virtuous without being insipid and in which duty and honor triumphed over temperament." In the novel seventeenth century notions of honor occasion the heroine's abnegation; in *Caesar's Wife* the twentieth century motive of patriotism is evoked. "By doing this I limited the success of the play to this country, since patriotism is a motive which does not travel; it is faintly ridiculous to a German or an American that an Englishman should make sacrifices for England."

Caesar's Wife has so little distinction that one wonders why the author includes it in his collected works. It does not suit Somerset Maugham to season his plays with sugar instead of salt. To be sure, salt is there: "Freedom generally means the power of the strong to oppress the weak." "She has a genius for order and organization in the house. Everything

DRAMATIST

went like clockwork. She saved me hundreds of pounds. She led me a dog's life. I've come to the conclusion that there's nothing so detestable as a good housekeeper." "Christina, like the majority of her sex, has an unerring eye for the discreditable motive." But there is more sweetness than light. It is "faintly ridiculous" to find a Maugham heroine following the path of duty because England and the Empire need her self-sacrifice. The dialogue often attains the specific gravity of that of a serious play by Dumas *Fils*, Sutro, or Pinero. Fortunately Somerset Maugham did not omit unpleasant people from the dozen plays he was still to write.



IF WE judge by its rarity, a good farce must be very difficult to write. The stock situations and stock characters of ordinary farces become excessively tiresome on stage or screen; mistaken identity, the wrong bedroom, and the comic disguise can amuse us only when they are used with great ingenuity. To write a good farce (a good farce is one that will divert people of adult intelligence), a playwright must have more than a mechanical skill in piecing together ingenious plot items; he must be a shrewd judge of character and able to write witty dialogue.

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

Few indeed are farces which combine freshness of plot with sound characterization and witty dialogue. Somerset Maugham's *Home and Beauty* possesses not only these merits, but the lively satire of high comedy as well. A farce is seldom entertaining unless acted (nor is it supposed to be), but *Home and Beauty* is extremely amusing to read.

It was produced at The Playhouse on August 31, 1919, with Charles Hawtrey, Gladys Cooper, and Jean Cadell. It had a topical interest, both in incidents and satire. Victoria, an exquisite war-worker with an eye to the main masculine chance, marries a close family friend when her husband is reported killed in battle. At the close of the war the husband returns, and each husband, having tasted the dubious delights of life with the beautiful but exacting and selfish Victoria, tries to surrender her to the other. She settles the question by divorcing her legal husband and marrying another war-worker, a manufacturer who emerged from the war with a Rolls-Royce, a country mansion, and other rewards reserved for certain patriots on the home front. The first two husbands are delighted to be free of her. News stories demonstrated the plausibility of the initial situation, and the rest of the story unrolls naturally. But it is not a serious play. The situations and characters are burlesqued to just the right degree to provoke a polite merriment from beginning

DRAMATIST

to end. The author does not hesitate to lavish his special gifts of wit, style, elegance, and satire on the farce.

The nearest approach to a note of seriousness is the misogamy of the heroes, which is more bitter than the farce requires. The women are all unscrupulous—Victoria, her predatory mother, the manicurist, the servants. The satire is on the side of good humor: Victoria's self-deception concerning her philanthropy and altruism, the scarcity of servants and other vexations of war-time, the bogus patriotism of the profiteer, the ludicrous English divorce laws and their hypocritical administration are objects of a penetrating but pleasant ridicule. The wit is often bright enough for a comedy of manners, particularly the comments of Victoria's worldly mother. "I always say the same things to the girls: look after your skin, and your bills will look after themselves." "The difference between men and women is that men are not naturally addicted to matrimony. With patience, firmness, and occasional rewards you can train them to it just as you can train a dog to walk on its hind legs. But a dog would rather walk on all fours and a man would rather be free." (She makes no acknowledgment to Dr. Johnson.) Victoria can not understand why her servants desert her.

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

VICTORIA: I've done everything in the world for them. I've fed them on the fat of the land. I've given them my own butter and my own sugar to eat.

FREDERICK: Only because they were bad for your figure, Victoria.

VICTORIA: They didn't know that. I've given them all the evenings out that I really didn't want them. And now they give me notice . . . Do you know it's harder to get a parlour-maid than a peerage. Why, every day at Paddington Registry Office you'll see a queue of old bachelors taking out licences to marry their cooks. It's the only way to keep them.

The author says that *Home and Beauty* pretends to be no more than a farce. "Some of the critics called it cruel and heartless. I should not have thought it was. It was written in the highest possible spirits. It was intended to amuse. The object [of comedy] is the entertainment of the audience, not their improvement." The revival of the play in 1930 with Joyce Bland as Victoria revealed that its power to amuse was as great as it had been eleven years before.



OF ALL Somerset Maugham's plays *The Unknown* aroused the most controversy, for it attacks in a

DRAMATIST

stubbornly unyielding and straightforward manner commonly accepted religious beliefs. For once the dramatist discards his theories and his objectivity and enters into the fight as frankly as does Shaw in his plays; no one can fail to see Somerset Maugham back of the unorthodoxy of the hero and of Mrs. Littlewood. It is a gripping play to read, but one wonders whether it would be so moving in performance. Opinions of those who saw *The Unknown* performed in 1920 indicate that prejudices and unfairness in the play were flagrant enough to make the drama itself unconvincing. In reading the play, however, one is less interested in the characters than in the arguments. The author agreed with his critics. He uses again the theme of one of his early novels, *The Hero*: an engaged couple discover that the religious fanaticism of one and the agnosticism of the other make a happy marriage impossible. "But to my surprise it appeared in representation that the drama lay in the arguments on one side and not at all in the personal relations of the characters. The result was that the play came to an end with the second act; the third consequently was meaningless and there was no trick or device I could think of that could make it significant."

The Unknown was produced at the Aldwych on August 9, 1920, with Basil Rathbone, Haidee Wright, C. V. France, and Lady Tree. It was attacked by

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

the critics, who pointed out that the play would never have been licensed before the war. The critics were justified in condemning the play if they felt the drama was smothered in surmise; they were not justified in asserting that Christianity is a sacrosanct subject that may not be debated in the theatre. The embittered mother whose two sons have been killed and the soldier on leave from the trenches have as much right to state their platitudes of disbelief as have the rest of the characters to express platitudes of belief. The critics, however, were justified in contending that debates on the stage about the nature of life and the destiny of man are interesting only when they are conducted by people of vigorous minds and deep feeling. Bernard Shaw's discussion plays are bearable because Shaw endows at least some of his debaters with his own intellect; but young Wharton has not Somerset Maugham's tolerance, powers of reason, and humor. In all Somerset Maugham's books written a few years before and a few years after the war, except in *Caesar's Wife*, a mistrust of human goodness and altruism is apparent. The fundamental ideas of *Caroline*, *The Moon and Six-pence*, *Home and Beauty*, *The Unknown*, *The Circle*, *The Trembling of a Leaf*, *Our Betters*, and *The Painted Veil* are, to varying degrees, cynical. In *The Unknown* he lashes what seems to him a vicious kind of religious optimism which obscures truth

DRAMATIST

and the facts of human nature. Fifteen years later in *Don Fernando* he exhibits a tolerance, even an understanding, of the religious temperament; in *The Unknown*, however, there is little attempt to understand Sylvia, and the Vicar is no more than a caricature.

St. John Ervine has pointed out in *The Theatre in My Time* that in Douglas Jerrold's *The Rent Day* (1832) the censor objected to and eliminated the line, "I love you, and may heaven pardon and protect you." It was considered blasphemous. In 1920 the censor did not object to Mrs. Littlewood's shocking blasphemy: "When God took my eldest son I wept, but I turned to the Lord and said: 'Thy will be done.' He was a soldier, and he took his chance, and he died in a good cause . . . But why did God take my second? He was the only one I had left . . . I haven't deserved that. When a horse has served me long and faithfully till he's too old to work, I have the right to send him to the knacker's yard, but I don't, I put him out to grass. I wouldn't treat a dog as my Father has treated me . . . you say that God will forgive us our sins, but who is going to forgive God? Not I. Never. Never!" Equally heretical are the physician's statements, for he arrives at his conclusions calmly, whereas Mrs. Littlewood is almost crazed with grief. A typical remark of the physician's is, "The rain falls on the just and unjust alike, but

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

the unjust generally have a stout umbrella." The dramatist is perhaps unfair in supplying the three intelligent characters of the play with a rational pessimism and the five stupid characters with a shallow optimism, but Somerset Maugham is quite capable of replying to the charge of unfairness that he is unable to divorce optimism and stupidity. In 1920 war wounds were still fresh, and thousands who saw *The Unknown* were striving to find comfort in religion; they undoubtedly found the play very painful.



MARCH 3, 1921, is the date of the first performance of *The Circle*, destined to be accepted as a masterpiece of modern drama, perhaps the finest of modern comedies. The production at the Haymarket in spite of excellent acting by Leon Quartermaine, Allan Aynesworth, Ernest Thesiger, and Fay Compton, was not successful. There was not a large audience in 1921 for a play frankly unmoral in ideas and sentiments, brilliantly witty and unsentimental, with no characters to claim complete sympathy, and, although not didactic, with an undercurrent of ethical teaching many find difficult to approve. In *The Circle* Somerset Maugham makes no concessions to

DRAMATIST

the audience; the play is written with intellectual and emotional honesty, and offers no bribes for popular favour. *The Circle* was successfully revived at the Vaudeville Theatre on March 2, 1931, with Frank Vosper, Celia Johnson, Allan Aynesworth, and Sir Nigel Playfair. It was promptly hailed by critics as the best play—old or new—of the year. It was pointed out that except for one word—“ripping”—the play might have been written in 1931. It had not dated. Perhaps no other modern play has been reprinted so often and included in so many anthologies. *The Circle* is already a classic.

The plot is simple. Thirty years after Lady Kitty deserted her husband, Clive, to run away with his best friend, Lord Porteous, she and Lord Porteous return to England and are entertained by Lady Kitty's daughter-in-law, Elizabeth. Soon after the play begins, it becomes apparent that Elizabeth is about to repeat her mother-in-law's rash act and elope with a young Colonial. Pressure is brought to bear upon Elizabeth to dissuade her: her husband pretends to be magnanimous and offers her money and a divorce; Lady Kitty speaks from personal experience and warns her; her lover assures her that they may not be happy. Elizabeth ignores the warnings, resists her husband's generosity, and chooses to learn by her own experience. They elope.

Here is entirely fresh treatment of the triangle sit-

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

uation, and a new and daring conclusion. (The audacious ending brought a protest from the gallery on the opening night.) The device of bringing together the ageing Lady Kitty, Lord Porteous, the deserted husband, and the three youthful members of the new triangle is bold and amusing. The opportunities for humor, sentiment, even excitement, are endless, but the dramatist has selected sparingly and deftly. *The Circle* is a masterpiece of construction and compression. Every speech either reveals character or advances the story. Exits and entrances, even the wit and humor, are flawlessly motivated. The machinery is not noticeable as it is in the made-to-order plays of Sardou and Sutro, but the play is well-made—and a pox on all who sneer at a play because it is well-made! It gains dramatic intensity from its smoothness and easy progress. It is the play in which the author has followed most conscientiously his own advice, "Stick to the point."

The Circle could have been made more "popular" in a number of ways. It is impossible, for instance, to like or dislike any of the characters very much. Elizabeth is courageous and honest, but a romantic goose. Her husband is a self-centred prig, but well-bred and honorable. Lady Kitty, armed with cosmetics and archness, is ludicrously trying to fight off old age; she is fatuous and immoral, but possessed of a certain brilliance, warmth, and generos-

DRAMATIST

ity. Her former husband is cynical and unscrupulous, but he has an engaging charm, and can laugh at himself as well as at others. Lord Porteous is crotchety, blustering, rude, but not entirely unkind and insensitive. The romantic young lover is breezy and charming, but not very intelligent. By suppressing certain traits and heightening others the author could have created sympathies and distastes which would have made the comedy more palatable for many play-goers. But he refuses to compromise or falsify either in characters or in ending.

The humor is that of high comedy at its best. Except at the extraordinary first entrance of Lady Kitty, Hughie's difficulties with his false teeth (a shattering blow at Elizabeth's romantic notions), and the exquisitely funny bridge game, one does not laugh aloud: the laughter is usually of the kind described by Meredith as laughter of the mind. There are no epigrams *per se*; the characters are witty, intelligent, and urbane and do not have to speak out of character. No lines seem very memorable when removed from their context, yet the entire play gives the effect of sparkle and wit. The wit possesses a hard and brilliant seriousness, and is often iconoclastic. "It's difficult for the young to realize that one may be old without being a fool." "I don't think you want too much sincerity in society. It would be like an iron girder in a house of cards." ". . . one

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

of the falsest proverbs in the English language. Why should you lie on the bed you've made if you don't want to? There's always the floor." "You can't learn too soon that the most useful thing about a principle is that it can always be sacrificed to expediency." "A woman will always sacrifice herself if you give her the opportunity. It is her favorite form of self-indulgence." "People are so unused to the truth that they're apt to mistake it for a joke or a sneer." "The tragedy of love isn't death or separation. One gets over them. The tragedy of love is indifference." But quotation does *The Circle* a disservice; the wit and humor are naturally the product of character and situation and cannot effectively be subtracted from them.

The Circle is a comedy, but by no means an artificial comedy of manners. Its philosophy is not fliprant but sound, and is delivered with conviction. It is not a soothing, pleasant comedy. At times it is disturbing, almost painful. The acid of its truth and of its anti-romanticism eats into us, and we do not forget it as we forget *Caroline* and *Lady Frederick*. Although the elements of deep pathos and tragedy are here, they are not utilized, and the play remains a comedy. The curtain falls on an ironic scene of laughter, the final note is that of comedy; the ending is neither moral nor romantic, the author neither blames nor condones. The philosophy of the play is expressed by Hughie, who is a failure, but who has

DRAMATIST

gathered wisdom with his years. "Man is a gregarious animal. We're members of a herd. If we break the herd's laws we suffer for it. And we suffer damnably." If Hughie had stopped with these words we would have only contempt for him, for there are greater guides to conduct and happiness than social pressure. The rules of society and the political order and of conventional morality are not fixed, but pliant in the hands of those with sufficient character to bend them. The quality of behavior should be dictated by one's character, not by conventions and the inconstant demands of society. Hughie knows that there are sterling people who, indifferent to Mrs. Grundy, discard the shackles of gentility, and achieve a sane and happy life. But there are no short-cuts to happiness. "My dear, I don't know that in life it matters so much what you do as what you are. No one can learn by the experience of another because no circumstances are quite the same. If we made rather a hash of things perhaps it was because we were rather trivial people. You can do anything in this world if you're prepared to take the consequences, and consequences depend upon character." It is the eternal creed of the individualist—society must yield to the single man with character enough to force it. Hughie and Lady Kitty have degenerated because they are flabby people. Are Elizabeth and Teddie equipped to take the consequences of their daring action, or will they too be defeated?

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

The Circle has been called an extremely cynical play. It has been pointed out that Clive is immoral but happy, that Lady Kitty is never genuinely repentant, that the marriage tie is set at naught. As far as Clive is concerned, he has shed all idealism and fortified himself against disappointment; and moralists have yet to prove that all people, regardless of temperament, are happy if they obey the dictates of society and unhappy if they disobey them. It is not more cynical to say that love does not always endure than to say that pneumonia is sometime fatal. Lady Kitty's mind brushes the surfaces of religion, philosophy, knowledge, but occupied almost altogether with preserving her youth and charm, she has become incapable of sincere emotions, even of one so barren as repentance. As for marriage, is one a cynic if he believes that institution of human rather than divine origin? *The Circle* is no more cynical than *Major Barbara*, but both plays propose a difficult ethic. Bernard Shaw says that the essential weakness in Christianity is the belief in the forgiveness of sins, that we would behave better if we believed we are going to be punished for each misdemeanour. How much less exacting is Christianity, which promises us escape from consequences! Hughie's challenge is equally hard: trot along with the herd, whatever your own convictions may be, unless you have enough character to suffer the consequences if you go your own way. Ludwig Lewisohn

DRAMATIST

has pointed out the superiority of *The Circle* over such a play as *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, in which the heroine defies convention but, too weak to bear society's condemnation, collapses and is pictured as pathetic rather than trivial. *The Circle* avoids such dishonesty, and it is its truthfulness that the romantic mistake for cynicism.



SOMERSET MAUGHAM's next play was the melodrama *East of Suez*, produced at His Majesty's Theatre on September 2, 1922. In its large cast of players were Maggie Albanesi, Basil Rathbone, Malcolm Keen, Henry Kendall, and C. V. France. *East of Suez*, although it proved popular with thousands who adored the films and *Chu Chin Chow*, is devoid of merit in print. When performed it appealed as a spectacle as well as a melodrama. The author says of it: "*East of Suez* purports to be a play of spectacle. I had long wanted to try my hand at something of the sort and a visit to China presented me with an appropriate setting. The bare bones of a story that I had for twenty years from time to time turned over in my mind, recurred to me. For the first and only time in my career as a dramatist I wrote the scenario which the professors of play writing teach their pupils to do." *East of Suez* has taken its place

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

among the thousands of dead plays of the past. It will never be revived, because of the tremendous expense entailed by its production, and because it is highly improbable that spectacular melodrama and problem play treated in the insincere manner of *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* will ever again attract considerable audiences except in the cinema theatre.



ON JANUARY 31, 1924, *The Camel's Back* was produced with Madge Titheradge and Frank Cellier in leading rôles. It was not a success, and was treated harshly by the critics for its feeble wit and unconvincing story. From 1922 for several years Somerset Maugham was busy with *The Painted Veil* and short stories of the South Seas. He seems to have devoted little care on the one play of the period, and is willing to let *The Camel's Back* be forgotten. It has never been published.



His next play, *The Letter*, was first performed at the Playhouse on February 24, 1927, with a cast containing Nigel Bruce, Leslie Faber, Marion Lind, and Gladys Cooper. It was a great favourite, and was also

DRAMATIST

produced successfully in America and France. *The Letter* is Somerset Maugham's best melodrama. It has no psychological subtlety, no "problems," no witty lines. Immediately after the curtain rises, there is a murder. The plot is extremely simple, but interest is maintained to the end largely because of ingenuity of construction. (Patriotic French critics said *The Letter* might have been written by Sardou.) Suspense is aroused naturally and effectively by a delayed exposition; the movement is rapid, and the end unpredictable. The exotic setting and the tight-lipped Chinese provoke a sense of mystery. Although a melodrama, *The Letter* is modern: there are no long, heroic speeches; after the initial murder, there is no outward violence; the talk is clipped, supple, vigorous; there are no sub-plots, no comic relief. It is not a play to see again and again like *The Circle*, for it says all it has to say the first time; but it will provide two hours of exciting entertainment in the theatre or one hour in the study for devotees of melodrama. *The Letter* is a dramatization by Somerset Maugham of his own short story by the same title which is included in *The Casuarina Tree* (1926).



IN APRIL of 1927 he gave to the stage another of his sparkling comedies of manners, *The Constant Wife*.

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

In spite of a cast containing such favorites as Mary Jerrold, Maida Vanne, Paul Cavanagh, Leon Quartermaine, Heather Thatcher, and Fay Compton, the play failed in London. The reviews were almost ferocious: "banal," "tedious," "devoid of wit," "straw figures," "trite," "dismal," were the critics' verdicts. The play was a great success in America. Somerset Maugham journeyed to Cleveland for the American opening. Ethel Barrymore did not know her lines and improvised, confusing and exasperating other members of the cast. After the last curtain call she rushed up to the author, magnificently contrite. "O, Willie," she cried, "I have ruined your play! It will run a year!" It did run a year, and was successfully revived by Miss Barrymore in 1935. The author says of its failure in London: "It was a great success in America, in the foreign countries where it has been produced, and even in the provincial towns in England . . . where it has been successful it has been much praised by the critics. Not of course because they have been influenced by its success, but because a play consists of the words, the production, and the audience; and the failure of one of the parties concerned may make the difference between a good play and a bad one."

The Constant Wife is an almost perfect example of artificial comedy. It is smooth and witty, and com-

DRAMATIST

pletely without emotion; consequently one can no more be shocked by it than by Wycherley's heartless plays. The seriousness is as artificial as the gaiety; even the theme is factitious—the notion that a wife owes fidelity to her husband only as long as she is his dependent economically. Artifice is as much a convention of this type of comedy as blank verse is to the Elizabethan tragedy. *The Constant Wife* borrows liberally from the plot of *Penelope*: Constance discovers that her husband, a physician, is having an affair with her best friend. She feigns ignorance of the situation as long as possible, goes into business, secures economical independence, and then announces that she no longer feels duty bound to be faithful to her husband—now temporarily cured of his philandering. Since we care nothing for the characters, clever repartee and bold and ingenious vindication of unorthodox attitudes and conduct substitute for emotional appeal. There is also plot interest, for we wonder what will happen to the characters although their complete extermination would leave us untouched. If the artificial comedy never comes into fashion again, *The Constant Wife* and *Our Betters* will serve as classic examples of the obsolete form.

Because of the absence of sentiment in the play, the epigrams, practically all unpleasant or cynical,

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

amuse but do not pain. "Frankness of course is the pose of the moment. It is often a very effective screen for one's thoughts." "Truth is an excellent thing, but before one tells it one should be quite sure that one does so for the advantage of the person who hears it rather than for one's own self-satisfaction." "We ascribe a great deal of merit to ourselves because we're faithful to our husbands. I don't believe we deserve it for a minute. We're naturally faithful creatures and we're faithful because we have no particular inclination to be anything else." "It's not the seven deadly virtues that make a good husband, but the three hundred pleasing amiabilities." "It's only if a man's a gentleman that he won't hesitate to do an ungentlemanly thing." "Men only abandon their vices when advancing years have made them a burden rather than a pleasure." "When the average woman who has been married fifteen years discovers her husband's infidelity, it is not her heart that is wounded but her vanity." This humor is extrinsic, superficial. *The Constant Wife* is *Lady Windermere's Fan* rewritten for a new generation; the melodrama is missing and an audacious ending is substituted for the sentimental reconciliation in the earlier play. Each ending fits the taste of its time, but both are equally incredible. *The Constant Wife* was the last play by

DRAMATIST

Somerset Maugham to betray the influence of Oscar Wilde.



HE HAD only four more plays to write. He felt that none of them would please a great many people, but he wanted to bring his long period of dramatic authorship, covering nearly forty years, to a close with the four plays which had shaped themselves in his mind and which he would compose principally for his own satisfaction. The first was *The Sacred Flame*, produced at the Playhouse on February 8, 1929, with Gladys Cooper, Mary Jerrold, Clare Eames, Richard Bird, and C. V. France. *The Sacred Flame* is a "strong" play, a type that has begun to go out of fashion. It is not altogether melodrama, for there is some subtlety in characterization, a debatable ethical problem is propounded, and interest is not exclusively focused on the plot as in *The Letter*. It lacks, however, the exaltation of tragedy, and the unhappy ending as well, and it fails to arouse the pity and sympathy of great tragedy. The author, however, calls it simply "a play," and the matter of classification is unimportant.

The play is deftly made, as tight and hard in construction as *Rosmersholm*. The narrative is clear,

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

the excitement is cumulative, and the ending, sudden and effective, is the logical fulfilment of what has preceded it. Soon after his wedding, Maurice is hopelessly crippled in an accident. His wife, Stella, with no hope of a normal married life, nevertheless devotes herself faithfully to him until she and Maurice's brother fall deeply in love with each other. Seeing the hopelessness of the situation, Maurice's mother gives her crippled son an overdose of a sleeping draught so that her younger son and Stella may be happy. Equal in plot interest is the ascetic love of Maurice's nurse for her charge, and her conviction that Stella is the murderer. The mystery is preserved without artifice until the last few minutes of the play, when the mother confesses. The theme of justifiable homicide aroused considerable controversy, but the struggle between the nurse and Stella—between frank passion and a dour sense of duty, between the woman yearning for life and the woman tortured by sex repressions—is no less dramatic in its treatment.

In *The Sacred Flame* Somerset Maugham tries an experiment in dialogue. He avoids naturalistic speech, but has the characters speak as if they have taken time to prepare each phrase and sentence with care and elaboration. The result is an occasional stateliness, but one is not conscious of the formality and literary style that the dramatist feels

DRAMATIST

to be the result of his efforts. The dialogue is suitable for a murder play which combines dramatic tenseness with dignity and escapes any trace of hysteria. Polite murder has given way in the theatre to murder by degenerates, as in *Night Must Fall*, *The Two Mrs. Carrolls*, *Love from a Stranger*, etc., which have the traditional ingredients of crisp, life-like dialogue, a comic servant, and a spasm of horror just before the final curtain. After this one experiment, which caused some difficulties at rehearsals, Mr. Maugham returned to a more naturalistic speech for his remaining three plays.



His next play is one of his best, an unpleasant, heartless comedy, bitter but extremely diverting for those who can stand the fare. *The Breadwinner* was produced at the Vaudeville Theatre on September 30, 1930, with Ronald Squire in the title rôle, supported by Peggy Ashcroft, Evelyn Roberts, and Marie Löhr. *The Breadwinner*, the story of a stockbroker who calmly deserts his fatuous and predatory family and his profession for no reason at all except that they bore him, has many antecedents. It might be, with slight modifications, the defection of Strickland in *The Moon and Sixpence*. It has its roots in

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

the rebellious characters in Ibsen and Strindberg. A growing misogyny finds expression in *The Breadwinner*. Moreover, for years Mr. Maugham had been growing more impatient with what struck him as the bumptiousness of youth, its assurance, intolerance, fatuity. There had been rumblings of discontent in nearly all his books since the war, and in *The Breadwinner* comes the explosion. In an age of youth-worship the attack is especially peppery, almost churlish. None of the author's comedies has more sting to its dialogue, none has more ironic drive. Here is a passage from a scene in which four young people are discussing their elders:

PATRICK: D'you think that when *we're* their age
we shall be as boring as they are?

JUDY: Oh, I don't see why we should for a
moment.

TIMOTHY: How old is your father, Pat?

PATRICK: I think he's forty-two, isn't he, Judy?

JUDY: Yes, he was comparatively young when he
married mummy. Twenty-three.

DIANA: One of those awful war marriages, I sup-
pose. Like Alfred and Dorothy.

JUDY: Oh, no. They must have been married be-
fore that. Pat's eighteen.

DIANA: Well, when was the war?

TIMOTHY: Oh, don't let's talk of that old war. I'm
fed to the teeth with it.

JUDY: What a bore the people are who went
through it.

DRAMATIST

PATRICK: Crashing.

JUDY: When they get together and start talking about their experiences I could scream.

DIANA: I know. As if anyone cared.

TIMOTHY: They were a dreary lot, that war generation.

DIANA: Well, don't forget that except for the war there would have been a lot more of them.

The adults, except the breadwinner himself, rival the young people in their inanity. Marjory Battle is arty, insincere, brainless; Alfred is the personification of shattering heartiness and good-fellowship; Dorothy strives to be alluring but succeeds in being only ridiculously arch. Charles rebels in spirit against his selfish and arrogant children, his silly wife, and the meaningless drudgery of his banal occupation. He frankly confesses that he no longer feels any affection for his children or love for his wife, divides his money with them, and departs. As in the case of Charles Strickland he is suspected of an "affair," but he wants only to be free of ties that are meaningless and irksome. The ending is bold, for Charles has no more respect for "holiest duties" than has Nora Helmer. The play is a comedy, since Charles's defection can cause no anguish to his family. They are as tired of him as he is of them—but he is their breadwinner. It is a man's play. Its acid laughter and briery wit are levelled

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

at parasitical women and conceited youth. Its aphorisms play havoc with copy-book saws propounding family duties. The crust of farce and witty comedy is sometimes too thin to conceal the rancour beneath. It was obviously written with a great deal of relish.



THE most significant English play of 1932 was Somerset Maugham's *For Services Rendered*, produced on November 1, 1932, at the Globe Theatre with Flora Robson, C. V. France, Louise Hampton, Cedric Hardwicke, Marjorie Mars, Ralph Richardson, and Marda Vanne in the leading rôles. It is the author's grimdest and most uncompromising tragedy. It is the story of the Ardsley family, which fifteen years after the war is smashed by the protracted arm of that internecine conflict. Leonard Ardsley, blinded in the war, does not weave mats at St. Dunstan's or sell matches in Piccadilly; he broods over the idiocy of man that makes such things possible. He whips those about him with his sardonic humor and pessimism. "They say suffering ennobles—it hasn't ennobled me. It's made me sly and cunning. Evie says I'm selfish. I am. But I'm damned artful. I know how to get people to do things for me by working on their sympathy . . ."

DRAMATIST

His outbursts are sometimes as electrifying as those of Mrs. Littlefield in *The Unknown*. "I know that we were the dupes of the incompetent fools who ruled the nations. I know that we were sacrificed to their vanity, their greed and their stupidity. And the worst of it is that as far as I can tell they haven't learned a thing. They're just as vain, they're just as greedy, they're just as stupid as they ever were. They muddle on, muddle on, and one of these days they'll muddle us all into another war. When that happens I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going out into the streets and cry: Look at me; don't be a lot of damned fools; it's all bunk what they're saying to you, about honor and patriotism and glory, bunk, bunk, bunk!" His spinster-sister, sex-starved because of the war, goes insane. A friend comes out of the war unfit for business, and is driven to suicide.

The drive of the play would be even harder had the dramatist not heaped horror on horror so immoderately. The sluttishness of Leonard's other unmarried sister can scarcely be attributed to the war, unless we wish to believe that the war caused a general decline in morals. Ethel's marriage would have been a fiasco under any circumstances. His mother's incurable disease is an unnecessary visitation, although her calm resignation to the inevitable contrasts effectively with the jeremiads of the other un-

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

fortunates. Such phrases as "Too bad to be true," "Too much of a bad thing," "Supped full with horrors," indicate the reaction of the critics. Somerset Maugham, however, wrote the play he had in his mind, not a play to win critics. He speaks of the tragedy in the Preface: "I expected nothing of *For Services Rendered*. During the rehearsals of this piece I amused myself by devising the way in which it might have been written to achieve popularity. Any dramatist will see how easily the changes could have been made. The characters had only to be sentimentalized a little to affect their behavior at crucial moments of the play and everything might have ended happily. The audience could have walked out of the theatre feeling that war was a very unfortunate business, but that notwithstanding God was in His heaven and all was right with the world . . . But it would not have been the play I wished to write." Of course this is no answer to the charge that too much misery curtails the authority of the play.

The construction of the play shows Somerset Maugham at his best. The reticulation of the threads of the plots is skillfully effected; nothing is vague or obscure. The props of the Ardsley household are weakened relentlessly one by one, until in the last minutes of the tragedy the collapse occurs. The curtain falls on a scene of mordant irony: Mr.

DRAMATIST

Ardsley, blind to the tragedy about him, sits down to the rite of afternoon tea and makes a little speech on the English home and good old England. He is interrupted by Evie, who in a "thin, cracked voice" insanely begins to sing *God Save the King* as the curtain falls. One may find fault with the logic of the play, but the sense of utter hopelessness at the end is overwhelming.

The central theme of the play is based on fact, as any reader of European newspapers can affirm. Within a period of a few days in the early spring of 1936 London newspapers reported the following disasters: In Hemel Hempstead a butcher killed his wife, two children, and himself, and at the inquest his father testified that his son, "who served in the Navy during the war, was badly wounded in the head at the Battle of Jutland. He never got over it and was never free from a headache. As far as I know, they were a perfectly happy family." An employee of the London County Council was arrested for theft. His counsel pointed out that he suffered from loss of memory and other aberrations. "During the war he was in an explosion, was blind for seven weeks . . ." At the inquest it was revealed that an ex-service man of Kidderminster who had committed suicide had suffered continuously "for twenty years from a wound received in the war." An accountant in Twickenham died of "peritonitis

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

arising from wounds received nineteen years ago in the war." A thousand such instances would not make *For Services Rendered* a convincing play, of course, unless dramatic skill and sincerity combine to make it so. But they serve as a partial answer to young critics who suspected that the general theme was the product of a cynical and morbid fancy.



SOMERSET MAUGHAM's last play, *Sheppey*, was produced at Wyndham's Theatre on September 24, 1933, with Ralph Richardson as Sheppey and Laura Cowie as the prostitute. The author shrewdly guessed that the play would not meet with popular success, but he did not anticipate the nature of the critics' objections. *Sheppey* has not been produced in America, but it has been enthusiastically received in Scandinavia and Central Europe, and in English provincial cities. In spite of niggling fault-finding by the critics, there was a grudging admission that the play had many elements of greatness, and that the author was pre-eminent among living English dramatists. The play was judged as a thesis play, whereas it is simply a play with a theme; it was judged as a tragedy, whereas it is a satirical comedy. The dramatist was scolded for being Somerset

DRAMATIST

Maugham and not Bernard Shaw, who would have preached a much more vigorous sermon on the text. The author writes of his play: "*Sheppety* puzzled a good many of the critics; some of them, strangely ignorant of the principles of the drama, reproached me because I had set a problem and had not solved it. The dramatist takes a situation and wrings out of it all the dramatic value he can. *Sheppety* does not set out to be a problem play; I should describe it as a sardonic comedy. It is this none the less because the action is placed in Camberwell rather than in Mayfair, and the dramatic conflict depends on the hero's attempt to act up to some of the precepts of Christianity rather than on the complications ensuing on his having gone to bed with another man's wife. When I wrote it I was aware that the last scene might displease . . . But it would be foolish not to recognize that they [the audience] were as puzzled as the critics. I am conscious that I am no longer in touch with the public that patronizes the theatre. This happens in the end to most dramatists and they are wise to accept the warning. It is high time for them to retire. I do so with relief."

The germ of the plot is to be found in "A Bad Example," a short story written by Somerset Maugham nearly forty years earlier. In the story a city clerk attempts to practise Biblical teachings,

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

and as a result is baited by his wife, his physician, and his clergyman. He is finally certified as insane after some amusing scenes in which the church and the medical profession are broadly satirized. "A Bad Example" is one of the stories in *Orientations* (1898).

Sheppey, a barber's assistant, is not only a good but a religious man. He has been struck by the onerous verse in St. Matthew, "Jesus said unto him, if thou wilt be perfect, go and sell all that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven, and come and follow me." He wins £8,000 on a sweep ticket, and proceeds to apply Christ's teaching literally. His wife and daughter, with worldlier designs on the windfall, fail to dissuade him, and finally have him certified as insane. Before he is removed to the asylum, however, he succumbs to a heart-attack.

Sheppey is a kindly, philanthropic man of average intelligence who wishes to test the practicability of Christianity. His wife and daughter have succeeded in divorcing religion and practice, and consequently have adapted themselves more easily to the modern world. Here is ample material for Somerset Maugham's bitter satire, which is delivered outright with no subtlety. The principal target is the bogus and hypocritical Christianity which does not go beyond mere form. Also satirized are the quackery of

DRAMATIST

the medical profession and the priggish, selfish younger generation as exemplified in Sheppey's daughter, a witless devotee of the films, and her opinionated, pompous fiancé. The play neither condemns nor approves Sheppey's fantastic notions of charity; the interest lies in the effect of his theories on those touched by them. They serve to test character and sincerity. *Sheppey* must be regarded as a satirical comedy, with no ethical or didactic intent whatever. Even the touching death scene is not in the tragic vein, although the representation of Sheppey's hallucination as he dies recalls the gripping scene in which Everyman starts on his long journey alone. But Sheppey's death brings the play to a happy if ironical ending. There is something exuberant about his escape. Here was one really too good for this world!

There is no more despicable character in Somerset Maugham's thirty plays than the priggish young schoolmaster who solemnly announces that the old men are finished and that youth is all that counts now. He speaks for his type when he condemns individualism and states the creed of the totalitarian—that sanity means doing what everybody else does, thinking what everybody else thinks. Such uniformity, he asserts, is the foundation of democracy; if any individual insists on acting or thinking independently, a lunatic asylum is the proper place

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

for him. Substitute "prison" or "chopping block" or "firing squad" for "lunatic asylum" and Ernie speaks for the rulers of more than two hundred million Europeans today. Fantastic conceptions of insanity find expression in Dr. Jervis, who believes that the desire for money denotes sanity, but that giving money away denotes insanity. Philanthropy, he asserts, is a sign of abnormality, often a result of repressed homosexuality. One of the most striking lines in the play is Mrs. Miller's sincere, ingenuous remark that if Sheppery had been a bad man it would be different, but that it seems so funny for a good man to become religious.

Sheppery is correctly described by its author as a sardonic comedy. He wrote it to please himself, and was not concerned when audiences were puzzled by it. They did not know how to accept it. Bernard Shaw would have thundered at the disastrous economic effects which would attend literal practice of Christ's teachings today; Galsworthy would probably have treated sentimentally the sociological aspects of the situation; but audiences were not prepared to regard *Sheppery* as a comedy. From stalls to gallery there were too many Ernies, Florries, and Dr. Jervises for audiences to accept the play with comfort. There may be times when *Sheppery* will find audiences, just as there are periods when *Troilus*

DRAMATIST

and *Cressida*, that ironical tragi-comedy bitter with disillusion and satire, may safely be performed. *Sheppey* will be one of the last of Somerset Maugham's plays to be forgotten. Its comedy is not so topical as universal, its satire is directed not at fads but everpresent snobbishness and hypocrisy; withal there is a sympathetic recognition of the beauty of good action, and a glow of poetry in the last scene that lift the play above mere acrimony and lampoon.



OF DRAMATIZATIONS of Somerset Maugham's stories made by other writers, *Rain* by John Colton and Clemence Randolph is the most celebrated; in fact it is more celebrated than any of the dramatist's own plays, and it aided considerably in enlarging his reputation. *The Painted Veil* was dramatized by Bartlett Cormack, and *The Moon and Sixpence* by Edith Ellis, neither with marked success.



TO REPEAT: It would be easy to exaggerate the significance of Somerset Maugham as a dramatist, if

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

“significance” implies the creation of new dramatic forms or the use of the drama for new and serious purposes. Like Barrie and Galsworthy he had the good fortune to start writing for the stage after Pinero, Jones, Wilde, and Shaw had ushered in a dramatic revival and brought into the theatre dignity and intelligence again. Maugham was no pioneer, no experimenter. His early serious plays are in the grim tradition of the Manchester School, and his early comedies derive in part from Oscar Wilde. He accepted the traditional dramatic forms and conventions and shaped his plays to conform to their demands. He has not been tempted to utilize experimental and bizarre dramatic forms such as expressionism, well aware that there is some truth in the generalization about style and man: in Somerset Maugham’s hands indirection, by whatever means of symbolism, would result in a weakening of interest and effectiveness. His natural bent toward candor and straightforwardness has limited him to the simple methods of realism. He might have made an expressionistic thesis play, for example, out of the material of *The Unknown* (and drawn enraptured audiences to the Arts Theatre for three successive Sunday evenings), but to him it seemed more effective to have individuals in familiar circumstances debating their religious beliefs.

Somerset Maugham has, nevertheless, made a con-

DRAMATIST

tribution to the modern drama. Not only did he write plays that amused audiences over a period of more than twenty-five years, but also he has written two or three that have enriched the English theatre and which would find a sure place in a national repertory theatre. William Archer points out that the general direction of drama has for centuries been towards a faithful imitation of life, "the sloughing-off from drama of the lyrical and rhetorical elements." For better or for worse drama has moved towards realism—utilizing an approximation of living talk and a plausibility of event and character, and abandoning operatic and extraneous elements. Such interesting plays as T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, Maxwell Anderson's verse dramas, and Denis Johnston's modern morality, *A Bride for the Unicorn*, keep the dramatic form varied, but they do not deflect the drama from its course. Somerset Maugham has contributed to the new drama in two ways: a simplified technique that entails no sacrifice of dramatic power, and a strong infusion of truth and candor. His technique may best be studied in such plays as *The Circle* and *The Breadwinner*, where he is most successful in observing his own precept: stick to the point. There are no minor characters, no sub-plots, no superfluous speeches. Every speech and action advance the story or reveal character, but there is no artificial compression. Truth

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

and integrity he has obtained by a ruthless suppression of the falsely romantic. He refuses to misrepresent or prettify human nature. He has the rationalist's respect for cause and effect, and scorns the wishful thinking of the conventional moralist. The endings of his plays result naturally from the preceding action, and are not manipulated to please the moralist and the romantic. He is more concerned with what people do than what they should do, with what happens rather than what should happen. As loathsome as we may find the men and women of *Our Betters*, they are not represented as being any less happy than chapel-goers in a Welsh mining village. In *The Circle* Clive Champion-Cheney admits that he is a wicked old man, but a happy one. The author does not perversely make happiness the reward of sin, but he endows Clive with a philosophy compounded of humor and disillusion which makes him defy conventionality with relative safety to his peace of mind. Lady Kitty, frivolous of mind and soul, rebels against convention and suffers; but her life has not been all misery, and the delights of the dressing table, religion, and philandering have afforded her many compensations. Hughie misses success and a career, but he has gained in wisdom and understanding. The end of *The Circle* is not romantic. The audience focuses its sympathy with difficulty, and there is no certainty that Elizabeth

DRAMATIST

and Teddie are not making a grave mistake. Every one knows that in real life parental affection can wear very thin, but where except in *The Bread-winner* can you find a father who has outgrown his love for his children but who instead of becoming a monster has remained charming and generous? It is suggested in *Grace, Caesar's Wife*, and *The Constant Wife*, that a wife's infidelity need not wreck a marriage; in *The Sacred Flame* that murder may be a kindness; in many plays and stories that normal men and women may fall *out of* love; in *For Services Rendered* that suffering and sacrifice may degrade human character rather than elevate it.

A final word should be said about the charge most frequently brought against Somerset Maugham, his cynicism. To what extent does he deserve the opprobrium? He certainly does not resemble the ancient cynic philosophers who held pleasure in contempt. He is too urbane and possesses too much of the comic spirit to be churlish or surly, and is so inclined philosophically to accept life and people as they are that he cannot in fairness be considered a sneering fault-finder. There is, nevertheless, a strain of the misanthrope in his nature. He confesses that he is unable to feel any great affection for his fellow-men. He is often disposed to disbelieve in their altruism and disinterested goodness. He has been called cynical for asserting that sexual love does

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

not last for ever; that there is no final truth; that a thing of beauty is not necessarily a joy for ever, for tastes change; that there is no explanation of evil; that man is in part what he must be, not altogether what he would be; that literal Christianity is impracticable; that there is little evidence of an all-benevolent and all-powerful deity; that vice is not always punished and virtue is not always rewarded; that we dislike those to whom we do injuries; that sexual irregularity is not the most heinous of sins. What is there in these assertions that a rational man could refute? It is undeniable that most of his plays have an ironical theme from *Lady Frederick* and *Smith* to *The Breadwinner* and *Sheppety*, but much of what is considered cynical arises from the absence of sweet and romantic elements. Perhaps such plays as *Home and Beauty*, *The Unattainable*, *The Circle*, *The Constant Wife*, and *The Breadwinner* are better described by "sec" than "cynical." One does not call *Chateau neuf-du-pape* cynical because it is not so sweet as port. It must be admitted, however, that the number of wholesome, decent, unselfish characters in his plays is small: Smith, Mrs. Ardsley in *For Services Rendered*, Sheppety, Sir Arthur in *Caesar's Wife*, Mrs. Tabret in *The Sacred Flame*—the list is not long. But Somerset Maugham would point out that few of his army of unpleasant characters are without some charming

DRAMATIST

traits. Although there is not one very pleasant character in *The Breadwinner*, *The Circle*, *Home and Beauty*, *The Unattainable*, *Our Betters*, or *Lady Frederick*, there are none without some redeeming charm or virtue. Somerset Maugham is even considered cynical for pointing out that he hardly deserves the name of cynic inasmuch as he finds so much that is good in the outcasts of society!

His own theories of the drama can be summarized very briefly. First of all, to write a good play one must possess the dramatic instinct—without it a thorough knowledge of technique and a high intelligence are wasted. He does not define “dramatic instinct.” Since the principal appeal of a play is through the emotions and not to the intellect, the basis of a play should be emotional. The stage should not be used for the purposes of propaganda or dissemination of ideas; the textbook or essay is more serviceable for these ends. Actual talk cannot be effectively reproduced on the stage; there must be a heightening and tightening of the colloquial. “The aim of the drama is not to instruct but to please. Its object is delight.” Too much fuss, he believes, is made over prose drama. It is a minor art form, and ephemeral, for to achieve actuality it must be superficially up-to-date, and as a consequence soon becomes dated. (The writer saw recently a performance of Clemence Dane’s fine play, *A Bill of Di-*

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

vorcement. Although less than twenty years old it is already dated by the family's lack of ease with the telephone, and their surprise that anyone should telephone them on Christmas morning.) The dramatist must relentlessly stick to his point. Conversation in comedy is necessarily artificial. "The aim of comedy is not to represent life but amusingly to comment upon it." The competition of the films may force the drama to utilise again the old devices of verse, fast tempo, beauty of staging, dancing. Prose drama in its present form seems to have reached a dead end.

Part IV

WRITER OF SHORT STORIES

SOMERSET MAUGHAM is probably more widely known as a writer of short stories than as a dramatist or novelist, for his short stories, through the medium of the popular magazine, reach hundreds of thousands of readers who never attend the theatre and who seldom read a book. Moreover the half dozen collections of his short stories have been widely read. He can afford to be amused by much of the criticism he has received as a writer of short stories. Many critics naturally enough are somewhat nonplussed by his enormous popularity, vaguely uncertain about the merits of a writer who has a large following among the *pollo*. He is also amused by English critics' frequent use of the adjective "competent" in judging his stories, for it is used in a slightly disparaging sense. He is not sure why competence should be a fault, but he suspects that the vogue of short stories by Chekhov, Katherine Mansfield, and their disciples has alienated a certain number of admirers of de Maupassant and his disciples.

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

What admirers of Chekhov are prone to discount is definiteness of form, which they regard as artificial. De Maupassant and Chekhov are perhaps the greatest of all writers of short stories; certainly they have been most influential in defining the literary form of the short story and exemplifying its methods. De Maupassant set the fashion for the tightly constructed, crisp story, bare of inconsequential details, with a well-defined beginning and a series of closely connected incidents leading to a sudden and often surprising end. Somerset Maugham says of these stories: "They do not wander along an uncertain line, so that you cannot see where they are leading, but follow without hesitation, from exposition to climax, a bold and vigorous curve." De Maupassant's characters are clearly presented, but they are not complex or subtle. The principal interest is in the anecdote; the brief but adequate descriptions of places and people advance the story. There is no relief from tension as we read; no stories deserve more justly the abused adjective "gripping." Chekhov's stories are of a pattern so different that they seem to have no pattern at all. His stories are as casual as the men and women of *The Cherry Orchard*. Inconsequential things are done and said, crises approached and shunned, climaxes averted; the stories often end "in the air." Despite their differences, the stories of de Maupassant and Chekhov

WRITER OF SHORT STORIES

are equally moving and readable. Chekhov gives us a mood, or a sense of the fluidity, perplexity, and mystery of life, or subtle characterization. He aims at reality, whereas de Maupassant aims at a violent realism or naturalism.

Somerset Maugham discovered de Maupassant's stories when he was a young boy, and when at the age of eighteen he began writing he naturally used the French stories as his model; "naturally" because of his thorough acquaintance with the masterpieces, and because of a similarity of temperament and philosophy. For one writes as he must; it is not probable that an early acquaintance with Chekhov's work could have led Somerset Maugham to imitate the great Russian. The fact that his stories have been more popular in France than in England and that French critics have never damned him as competent has for Somerset Maugham a possible explanation: "The French, with their classical sense and their orderly minds, demand a precise form and are exasperated by a work in which the ends are left lying about, themes are propounded and not resolved, and a climax is foreseen and then eluded. This precision on the other hand has always been slightly antipathetic to the English. Our great novels have been shapeless . . . This is the life we know, they have thought, with its arbitrariness and inconsequence . . . If I am right in this surmise, I can do noth-

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

ing about it and I must resign myself to being called competent for the rest of my life. My pre-possessions in the arts are on the side of law and order." (Preface to *East and West*.)

Somerset Maugham defines a short story as "a piece of fiction, of any length you choose, which deals with a single situation, but this situation may be a mood, a character, or an event." Although most readers still prefer stories of incident, in recent years the predilection of readers and critics among the upper levels of the intellectuals has been for the story delineating a mood, and consequently recent criticism from Bloomsbury and Greenwich Village has exalted Chekhov and his school at the expense of de Maupassant and his school. Mr. Maugham asserts that it is the fashion of the moment, and that the delineation of character or incident need not be of less consequence than the delineation of a mood. He points out that the difference between a short story and a novel does not lie in extent, since a narrative of some length such as Swinnerton's *Nocturne* conforms to the demands made by a short story, and Chekhov's brief narrative, "The Lady with the Dog" is in reality a novel. The distinguishing characteristic of a short story is its static quality, the revelation of a situation rather than the careful building up and preparation for it. The novel takes time for the process and thereby achieves a dynamic quality.

WRITER OF SHORT STORIES

Somerset Maugham actually reads with interest various textbooks on short story writing (as Barrie is said to peruse books on playwriting), for he enjoys theory and criticism; but he does not find these guides very helpful. He has written many pages outlining his own theories of fiction, but an aspiring writer would likewise not find them very helpful. His stories, however, speak for themselves. They are distinguished by their lucidity, simplicity, and liveliness. The fact that they are readable is sufficient proof of their *competence*; readability is the first of merits.

More than half the stories have a setting in the Far East, with British Colonials, natives, and half-castes as characters. A multitude of readers know Somerset Maugham only as the author of these exotic tales. Desmond MacCarthy has pointed out that some literary reputations spread outward from a narrow circle of admirers, whereas others spread inward from a wide circumference of readers; that is, some authors and artists first impress the few and gradually achieve popular success, whereas others first win popular success and then impress the intellectuals. For the most part reputations such as Dickens's, Charlie Chaplin's, Balzac's, which spread inward from without, are more sure. Somerset Maugham belongs to that happy group whose books satisfy the discriminating few and please the many,

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

and his reputation has spread inward. He first became widely celebrated for popular comedies, then years later for exotic stories of the East. Sound critical appreciation of masterpieces such as *The Circle* and *Of Human Bondage* formed more slowly, but it has grown steadily with the passing years.

De Maupassant set the vogue in short stories for the abrupt surprise ending. In France and the United States the "trick" story, the story of incident with an unanticipated *dénouement*, has attained a high mechanical and technical skill. Most of Somerset Maugham's stories are of the same type, except that he often substitutes a surprising ethical point of view for the unexpected final incident. Nothing fascinates Somerset Maugham so much as human behavior, particularly the aberrations of seemingly normal people. He can make an unconventional ethic, a defense of exceptional conduct, or a denunciation of plausible conduct as exciting as violent melodrama. At the same time his stories remain stories of incident, not tortuous studies in psycho-analysis. He sketches the scene and characters broadly but adequately, the story is told, the unaccountability of human nature is illustrated, a character interprets, or comments upon, the behavior of the protagonist. A typical story is *Footprints in the Jungle*. The author while travelling in Malaya is a guest of a police commissioner in Tanah Merah. The two en-

WRITER OF SHORT STORIES

gage in a bridge game at the club with Cartwright, a planter, and his wife. Later the policeman tells the story of the Cartwrights. Many years before, young Cartwright had lived in the home of the Bronsons. One evening Bronson was found murdered and robbed. A year later Cartwright married his widow. Then the policeman discovered evidence which proved beyond a doubt in his own mind that Cartwright had murdered Bronson at Mrs. Bronson's instigation. They were desperately in love, and callously had put the husband out of the way; however the evidence was not of a character to impress a jury, and the policeman kept quiet. "I held my tongue and the Bronson murder was forgotten."

"I don't suppose the Cartwrights have forgotten," I suggested.

"I shouldn't be surprised. Human memory is astonishingly short and if you want my professional opinion I don't mind telling you that I don't believe remorse for a crime ever sits very heavily on a man when he's absolutely sure he'll never be found out . . . They are very nice people; they're about the pleasantest people here. Mrs. Cartwright is a thoroughly good sort and a very amusing woman . . ." No violent catastrophe could shock more than this casual denial of what has been almost universally accepted as a truth. Two people commit a dastardly crime, the poisoned chalice does not re-

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

turn to their own lips, and after a time they lead a normal, fairly happy life.

Throughout the short stories is the same pervasive irony that sharpens the plays and novels. Were Somerset Maugham not so expert a *raconteur*, his iconoclasm and anti-romanticism would repel the average reader, who, however brave he may be in everyday life, is notably lacking in courage in his reading. He likes wish-fulfilment fiction, optimism, poetic justice, romance, little of which he finds in the stories of Somerset Maugham. The average reader may deplore what he considers cynicism but he finds the stories readable enough to triumph over the wormwood. In "The Back of Beyond" a character is accused of cynicism and replies: "I haven't deeply considered the matter, but if to look truth in the face and not resent it when it's unpalatable, and take human nature as you find it, smiling when it's absurd and grieved without exaggeration when it's pitiful, is to be cynical, then I suppose I'm a cynic. Mostly human nature is both absurd and pitiful, but if life has taught you tolerance you find in it more to smile at than to weep." This is, of course, the author speaking. Perhaps it is his tolerance which has helped create the bogey of his cynicism, his refusal to be outraged by human nature at its worst. The average man is suspicious of tolerance and agrees with Claude Bernard: *Il ne suffit pas de*

WRITER OF SHORT STORIES

rester spectateur inerte du bien ou du mal. Il faut faire naître l'un et le développer, lutter avec l'autre pour extirper et détruire. But Somerset Maugham is not actively concerned over other people's conduct, over good and evil. He is content to be an observer and to report; often to try to explain behavior, rarely to judge it.



His third book was his first collection of short stories, *Orientations*, published in 1899. Some of the stories had been written before *Liza of Lambeth*, but he had not been able to market them. The six stories in the collection have no great distinction; they are "orientations, to find one's literary self" as the young author explains (rather pompously, in French) after the Table of Contents. They are not without interest, however, as the youthful work of one who has become a great stylist. The prose has little of the simplicity, suppleness, and rhythm of his later work, but it is evident that his lively sense of humor and his irony were acquired early in life. The first story, "The Punctiliose of Don Sebastian," is the fruit of an early visit to Spain. It is a humorous account of a Spanish don who, after his wife's death, discovers that she had long been the

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

mistress of his own brother, an archbishop. He thereupon murders his brother, becomes a court favorite, and makes a successful second marriage. The story is thoroughly unmoral; the murderer suffers no remorse, no twinges of conscience taint the happiness of his last years.

The second story, "A Bad Example," conforms to the author's definition of a novel. It is the story of a city clerk who tries to apply Christianity literally to the problems of everyday life. As a result he is certified and sent to an insane asylum. The style is curiously jaunty and Dickensian. We know that later Somerset Maugham made a serious study of English prose style. In no story of his maturity would one find such a flaunting of adverbs as in this sentence: "She walked tempestuously down to Fleet Street, jumped fiercely on a 'bus, frantically caught the train to Camberwell, and, having reached her house in the Adonis Road, flung herself furiously down on a chair . . ." There is ample opportunity for satire: the wife considers Bible reading a symptom of abnormality, the clergyman is irritated by the proposal to interpret literally the Sermon on the Mount, the physician's notions of sanity are far from scientific. Perhaps the greatest distinction of "A Bad Example" is that it is the source of *Sheppety*.

"De Amicitia" is a mocking idyll that the youthful Meredith might have composed. Its one merit is

WRITER OF SHORT STORIES

the exquisite, brief descriptions of Holland. "Faith" is the pathetic story of a Spanish Monk who lost his faith, and could not regain it. The ending is ironical: after he has been hounded to death for his apostasy, a tradition of his piety arises, and he is finally canonized. Barbusse himself could not have described the scourging more powerfully,—it is almost sickening in its horror. "The Choice of Amynatas" is an ineffective mixture of romance, satire, and parable, the kind of fairy story Max Beerbohm might have written.

The best story in *Orientations* is "Daisy," a short novel. The scene is in Blackstable, and the characters small town gossips and snobs. The story lacks balance and fairness—the virtuous people have all the disagreeable qualities and the sinners have too much charm and generosity—but it has the vigor and slashing humor of *Main Street*, which it somewhat anticipates. Like Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and W. L. George's *A Bed of Roses*, "Daisy" has a shocking ending: a former prostitute, unrepentant, is happy and prosperous. In what other nineteenth century English fiction does an author boldly bring happiness and wealth to a woman who runs away with a married man? These stories presage the boldness of the author, if not the excellence of his prose style. He included none of these stories in the one-volume collection which he published in London in

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

1934 under the title *Altogether* (published in America as *East and West*).



UNTIL the World War Somerset Maugham's chief interest was in the drama, and he wrote no more short stories for nearly twenty years. It was not until his war-time journey to the South Seas furnished him with themes which he thought more suitable for the brief narrative than for the novel or drama that he resumed short story writing. "It was as a beginner of over forty that I wrote the story that is now called *Rain*." His stories, practically all of which were first published in magazines, he wrote primarily as a relief from other work which was growing irksome. By the time of the war he could afford to write for his own satisfaction. On his journey he took notes on what he observed and listened to other men's stories; four years later he wrote "*Rain*." This most celebrated of modern English short stories was refused by half a dozen magazines in spite of the author's eminence. Subsequent stories suffered a similar fate. When he had written six, he published them under the title *The Trembling of a Leaf*. The title is from Sainte-Beuve: *L'extrême félicité à peine séparée par une feuille*.

WRITER OF SHORT STORIES

tremblante de l'extrême désespoir, n'est-ce pas la vie? The characters are Europeans in the South Seas, in an alien environment to which they adjust themselves with difficulty and often with some sacrifice of balance and tranquillity. The title suggests that they are of an unsettled nature, equally susceptible to ecstatic happiness or extreme despair—which are separated only by the trembling of a leaf. The book made Somerset Maugham's fame as a writer of short stories as great as his fame as a dramatist and as a novelist.

The book begins with a brief invocation to the Pacific written in a rhythmic prose suggestive of the swell of the ocean; it is perilously near what the author contemptuously calls "detestable stuff"—a prose poem. The first story is "Mackintosh," a powerful psychological study of an island administrator and his assistant; they are completely unlike in temperament, tastes, education, ethics. The administrator, Walker, Pickwickian in appearance, is gross, sensual, hearty, thick-skinned, boorish, and unscrupulous; but in his crude way he is competent on the island. His assistant, Mackintosh, gaunt and ascetic, is scholarly, tidy, refined, educated. He grows to loathe his vulgar superior, who never suspects that he is the object of hate, and who drives Mackintosh to exasperation with his revolting crudeness. Walker becomes engaged in an altercation with

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

some native laborers. One of them takes a revolver which Mackintosh had purposely left available, murders Walker, and then replaces the weapon. Mackintosh is thereupon seized by an agonizing remorse, and kills himself. Although he is not actually guilty of murder, his puritan conscience does not relax even in this land of easy morals, and he finds life intolerable. There is a fierce irony in the catastrophe—Mackintosh is driven to self-destruction because of the death of the man whom he hated savagely. The story is completely objective: both men are presented fairly, and we feel pity and horror for both. Those readers who demand poetic justice in fiction will relish "Mackintosh," which is a completely moral story.

The most cheerful story in *The Trembling of a Leaf* is "The Fall of Edward Barnard." It, too, is a study of environment, but the effects are not disastrous. The author's attitude is far from objective, and we are justified in surmising that his own views are expressed by Edward. Edward Barnard is sent to the South Seas on a business mission, succumbs to its spell, and renounces his American fiancée, a successful future, and the various amenities of civilized existence in Chicago. He remains in Papeete, shorn of ambition but happy. He maintains that he has lost the whole world but has secured his soul. His good friend who comes to take him back to

WRITER OF SHORT STORIES

America is the personification of success and decorum. He is shocked by the languid, torpid life on the island, and a bit nettled that wants can be satisfied with so little expenditure of energy. He attempts to persuade Edward to return to America, and in their debate the author obviously states sympathetically the views of Edward, whereas his friend (in high, stiff collar) is a caricature of civilized man. There are beautiful bits of description, and a certain amount of suspense in the delayed expression of Edward's stand. Few can read "The Fall of Edward Barnard" without craving to set sail for the South Seas.

Somerset Maugham proves himself a shrewd judge of his own work when he selects "Red" as his best story. Its technique is flawless, and it conforms to the author's definition of a short story. Every detail serves to make the final irony more shattering; unity of time is secured through a clever and plausible revelation in dialogue of antecedent events. The story begins with a rapturous idyll, an account of a great and beautiful love of a white sailor and a native girl. Both are of extraordinary beauty. One day Red, the young lover, disappears and the girl is inconsolable. After some years she is persuaded to marry another white man, but her worship of Red does not abate. When she is old and fat, Red accidentally meets her and her husband. Red is obese,

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

bald, and vulgar. She does not recognize him, but her husband does. "Was that the man who had prevented him from being happy? Was that the man whom Sally had loved all these years and for whom she had waited so desperately? It was grotesque . . . He had been cheated. They had seen each other at last and had not known it . . . The gods had played him a trick and he was old now . . . He wondered what she would say if he told her now that the fat old man sitting in the chair was the lover whom she remembered still with the passionate abandonment of her youth." No more cruel love story has ever been written. Paolo and Francesca, and Romeo and Juliet die in love and beauty; but Red and Sally live to be obscene in appearance and shabby of soul. One familiar with the author's works might suspect that he makes the beginning lovely and idyllic merely to intensify the bitterness of the end. "Red" is the most haunting and tragic of Somerset Maugham's stories. If the style were more austere, a little less rich and elegant, it might well pass as a story by de Maupassant.

"The Pool" is likewise tragic, but not so moving as "Red." It is a sordid story of the degeneration of a Scotsman who, ignorant of native psychology, naively trusting in the saw that human nature is the same the world over, marries a beautiful native girl and treats her as a white man would treat a

WRITER OF SHORT STORIES

white woman. The marriage fails, but his infatuation survives. Miserable and jealous, and almost constantly drunk, he sinks under public scorn and self-loathing, and commits suicide. Although "The Pool" lacks the ironic force of "Red," irony is not missing: if the hero had been less decent and taken the native girl as a mistress, the tragedy might have been averted. European notions of honor are sometimes disastrous at home (as in *A Man of Honour*), but they must be practised with even more wariness in the East. The story is not without elements of beauty and poetry; especially exquisite are the descriptions of the pool, which becomes a half-mysterious symbol. If "The Fall of Edward Barnard" is capable of luring Europeans to the South Seas, "The Pool" is equally capable of discouraging their emigration.

"Honolulu" is a story of unexplained animal magnetism, common in the East and in various forms not unknown in Ireland and other parts of Europe. A ship's captain is put under a voodoo spell by a native enemy and escapes his fate only when the native is killed. It is a fantastic yarn, but the fact that the character to whom the story is told is sceptical of its genuineness permits the reader to regard it merely as a piece of folk-lore.

"Rain," Somerset Maugham's best-known story, had its beginning in a brief entry in the author's

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

notebook. While travelling from Honolulu to Pago-Pago, he jotted down impressions of passengers who attracted his attention. Of Miss Thompson he wrote: "Plump, pretty in a coarse fashion perhaps not more than twenty-seven. She wore a white dress and a large white hat, long white boots from which the calves bulged in cotton stockings." Of the missionary he wrote, "He was a tall, thin man, with long limbs loosely jointed . . . hollow cheeks, and high cheek-bones, his fine large dark eyes were deep in their sockets, he had full, sensual lips, he wore his hair rather long. He had a cadaverous air and a look of suppressed fire." He also made an extended description of the missionary's wife. He talked once with the missionary and his wife, but not at all with Miss Thompson. He then made a rough draft of the story.

"Rain" (originally called "Miss Thompson") is a masterpiece which the tense but melodramatic stage version, the moving picture vulgarizations, and the rather lurid advertising have not damaged. Much of its power comes from its restraint. The missionary is not merely a narrow-minded fanatic; he is courageous and sincere. Sadie is not sentimentalized; she is friendly and generous, but nauseatingly gross. Dr. MacPhail, the *raisonneur* and chorus of good sense, is ineffectual, and the thin piping of his rationalism is all but unheard amid the blasts of Davidson's

WRITER OF SHORT STORIES

fanaticism. The maddening effect of persistent rain is cleverly suggested by a minimum of weather talk. The Freudian undertones of the tragedy are heard plainly only once—in the “hills of Nebraska” dream. Practically none of the strenuous conversations between Sadie and the minister are reported; the most dramatic scenes in the story, Davidson’s attempts to make love to the prostitute and his suicide, are not described at all. The ending is swift; Sadie’s last line reveals the whole truth. The qualities of “Rain,” however, are not all negative. The characters are sharply delineated; Pago-Pago is unforgettably painted; the everlasting rain at first slightly depresses the reader, but its effect is cumulative and becomes almost distracting. The story, taut in construction and simply told, is bold and exciting. The implications of unhealthy asceticism and sex-repression make “Rain” a notable pioneer in Freudian fiction.



SOMERSET MAUGHAM continued to write stories at infrequent intervals, but a third collection was not published until 1926. *The Casuarina Tree* repeated the success of the first collection and established Somerset Maugham’s high reputation among writ-

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

ers of short stories. In an introductory note the author discussed the difficulty of hitting upon an honest and effective title for a collection of stories, and explains, not very convincingly, the symbolism of the casuarina tree. It is a grey, rugged tree found on tropic coasts, a bit grim beside the lush vegetation about it; it suggests the exiled Europeans who in temperament and stamina are often ill-equipped for life in the tropics. (Mr. Maugham has a casuarina tree in his garden at Cap Ferrat.)

Although all six stories deal with the British in the East, the setting of the first, and the best, story is in England. "Before the Party" is an ironical comedy unusual in technique. Nothing happens in the story; a family consisting of two young women and their parents is about to leave their house for a garden party at the vicar's. While they draw on their gloves and await their car, the widowed daughter tells the truth about her husband's death. The interest lies in the reception of the shocking story by her formal, decorous family, rather than in the story itself. The reader knows as little as the family, and shares their surprise when they learn that their son-in-law was a hopeless drunkard and that their daughter murdered him. Upset as they are, they leave for the garden party. The technique is like that of Ibsen's *Rosmersholm*: it is all exposition. The surprise at the end comes from a calm statement by

WRITER OF SHORT STORIES

the murdereress, who is free of remorse. "You'll get used to it, you know," she said quietly. "At first I thought of it all the time, but now I forget it for two or three days together. It's not as if there was any danger."

"P. & O." suffers somewhat from a division of interest: there is the story of the Irish planter returning home for good, longing for Ireland again; but his native mistress has put him under a spell, and he dies before the ship reaches Aden. On board also is Mrs. Hamlyn, returning to England to divorce her husband, who has offended her vanity by falling in love with a woman eight years her senior. The stories touch when the Irishman dies. His tragedy forces her to reflect over the brevity of life, the precariousness of the snatches of human happiness afforded us. She is filled suddenly with a great tolerance and magnanimity. "Why did people make themselves unhappy? Let them weep for the death of those they loved, death was terrible always, but for the rest, was it worth while to be wretched, to harbor malice, to be vain and uncharitable?" She thought again of herself and her husband and the woman he so strangely loved. He, too, had said that we live to be happy so short a time and we are so long dead. She wants to sacrifice herself. She writes to her husband that she forgives him and will do nothing to stand in the way of his happiness. There

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

is no irony in her resolution, no trace of cynicism, but a depth and beauty as sincere as unexpected. The irony of the story is found in the protracted discussions of the first-class passengers when they are planning a Christmas party: shall they invite the second-class passengers or not? Never has snobbishness been painted more odious.

In "The Outstation," however, snobbishness appears more ludicrous than detestable. The situation is similar to that in "Mackintosh": two officials thrown together in an out-of-the-way post come to despise each other. Warburton is a gentleman and a snob. He dresses for dinner, reads the *Times* at breakfast (six months late to the day), corresponds regularly with Lord This and Lady That. He is a good administrator, and just. Cooper, his assistant, is a man of the people, vulgar in tastes, and disdainful of class distinctions. He is careless as to dress, unmannerly, and tactless with the natives. Neither character gains our complete sympathy and their thickening animosity becomes very dramatic. Finally Cooper is killed by a native whom he has maltreated. Although Warburton suspects his assistant's danger and does not prevent the murder, he is not driven to suicide as was Mackintosh. He feels a great relief. He resumes with satisfaction his formal, stuffy routine, so rudely upset by the barbarian Cooper. "The Outstation" is a simple but powerful study of

WRITER OF SHORT STORIES

antipathy that grows into intense hate. In lonely Eastern communities dramatic situations may easily be formed when people of widely different temperaments are thrown closely together.

"The Force of Circumstance," which treats of the white woman's attitude toward miscegenation, is equally simple, but more beautiful, and free as it is of irony, closer to the pathetic than any other of Somerset Maugham's stories. An ideal marriage is shattered when a young wife discovers that her husband once had an alliance with a native woman, who had borne him several children. Her reason assures her that the affair is over, that her husband worships her; but her instincts override her reason. She tortures herself by picturing the Malay woman's black arms around Guy's neck; she recalls with horror that his black children were born in her bed. She returns to England, and Guy, crushed and lonely, permits the Malay woman to return to his house. The revelation of the antecedent action comes slowly and dramatically as in "Before the Party." The story is presented with complete objectiveness; the behavior of the man and wife is neither condemned nor defended. Paul Dottin has pointed out that Guy is conquered by two weaknesses: his naïve belief that the past does not exist, and his equally naïve belief that woman is a creature of reason and

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

good sense, whereas she really follows her impulses and instincts.

“The Yellow Streak,” which is founded on an actual experience, is the least interesting story in *The Casuarina Tree*. It is a psychological study of fear and a cowardly action which result in a torturing remorse. The author takes care to point out that the coward is a half-caste, but why? Would a hundred per cent Englishman never fail to be valorous? “The Yellow Streak” is readable for the exciting account of the tidal wave, rather than for the behaviour of the characters.

“The Letter” is a melodramatic story of absorbing interest which suggests that Somerset Maugham might compose excellent detective stories. The story is the thing; the characters are broadly sketched, and there is no psychological study of jealousy, remorse, or fear, which the situation might afford. The anecdote was told to Somerset Maugham in the East, and the short story he made of it caused no little scandal and concern among certain Colonials. In “The Letter” Leslie Crosby in a fit of jealousy murders her lover, and is believed when she declares that she shot to save herself from attack. An incriminating letter, however, comes to light, and Leslie’s husband learns the truth. He leaves his wife, after her acquittal in the court. The ending is

WRITER OF SHORT STORIES

a trifle flat after so much excitement. Leslie is a monster, almost the only character in all Somerset Maugham's fiction with no redeeming traits.

In a postscript the author foresees that Colonial readers will attempt to identify certain characters in *The Casuarina Tree* with real people. The postscript somewhat bitterly attacks these gossipy readers in advance, and defends the author's right to take *characteristics* from living people. "A work of fiction . . . is an arrangement which the author makes of the facts of his experience with the idiosyncrasies of his own personality. It is an unlikely, and unimportant, accident if it happens to be a copy of life . . . Facts are but a canvas on which the artist draws a significant pattern. I venture therefore to claim that the persons of these stories are imaginary . . ." The story of "The Letter" and other incidents were told to him—"I had nothing to do but make them probable, coherent and dramatic." The snobbish official in "The Outstation" was suggested by a British consul in Spain he had known many years before. The germ of "Before the Party" is an entry in his notebook concerning a Resident who took a bottle of whiskey to bed with him every night. Perhaps Somerset Maugham protests too much that his characters are largely imaginary; the fact remains that few other modern writers have been

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

so widely suspected of using actual people as models for disagreeable characters in their fiction.



SOMERSET MAUGHAM waited until ten years after the armistice to write his war book, and he wrote it as fiction. Obviously he could not give a factual account of his experiences in the Intelligence Department, partly because they were of a secret nature, and partly because they were for the most part dull and monotonous. He notes with characteristic wry humor, however, that *Ashenden* is not much more fictional in character than many of the war books that pretend to be truthful memoirs. *Ashenden* is a collection of six long stories and two or three briefer war-time anecdotes. They all deal with experiences of Ashenden, a secret agent, and have their settings in Switzerland, France, Italy, and Russia. The author's attitude toward his material is unusual. It is slightly deprecatory; he is vaguely embarrassed by the melodrama coloring his duties, and takes refuge in humor and in an austerity that often hardens into callousness. In countless novels and plays the experiences of a secret agent had been anticipated with such raciness that the real thing seemed an anticlimax. Reality seemed more artificial than fic-

WRITER OF SHORT STORIES

tion. Switzerland itself had a picture post-card showiness—" . . . the lake was absurd, the water was too blue, the mountains too snowy, and its beauty, hitting you in the face, exasperated rather than thrilled." But because of understatement, humor, and detachment, the stories in *Ashenden* achieve a power and verisimilitude they might have lacked had the author exploited more vigorously the melodramatic aspects of his experiences.

"Miss King" is the story of an old governess who dies before she is able to make a statement of seeming importance. The story draws an unforgettable picture of Geneva in war-time. "The Hairless Mexican" is an exciting murder story enlivened by rich humor; its ending, swift and shocking, is both plausible and unexpected. "Giulia Lazzari" is equally exciting, and contains opportunities for pathos which the author resolutely shuns. The ending is characteristically ironical in its unexpected revelation of character. "The Traitor" is a harrowing story of the trapping of a German spy. "His Excellency" has a very indistinct connection with the war. A governor tells Ashenden of an ignominious love affair which is of particular interest to readers of *Of Human Bondage*, as the vulgar object of the governor's adoration is another Mildred Rogers. The last story, "Mr. Harrington's Wash-

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

ing," draws incidentally a picture of Russia during the revolution which is more memorable than the portrait of Ashenden's astonishing travelling companion.

The stories are realistic, but differ from the war-fiction of Barbusse, Remarque, and other realists in that the author is content to report without comment. In all of *Ashenden* there is no expression of political bias, no intimation that England and her allies are in any way more upright than the enemy, or that German spies are more perfidious than British spies. His detachment is annoying to both the God-and-Country patriots, and to the pacifists who would amplify the horrors of war; but *Ashenden* is a delight to readers who prefer readable stories uncolored by the author's political prejudices.



SOMERSET MAUGHAM is best known for his exotic stories of the East, but he writes with equal proficiency of the Englishman in his native land. *First Person Singular* (1931) contains six stories, all of which have a European setting, and which are equal in merit to the stories in *The Trembling of a Leaf* and *The Casuarina Tree*. Two of the tales have to

WRITER OF SHORT STORIES

do with eccentric behavior, two are humorous; one is a tragic story of artistic failure; and one is an ironical study in ethics—"The wages of virtue is death." The author's critical, if not cynical, personality is more manifest than ever. The title of the book prepares us for the personal touch. The author is a minor character in each story, a slight catalytic agent in the plot, and a chorus commenting with dry humor on the characters and their conduct. There is a foreword in which the author repeats his views about drawing characters from life.

"Virtue" is as ironical as its title. A middle-aged woman falls in love with a younger man and leaves her husband, who adores her. Her husband is finally driven to suicide, and she is rejected by the younger man. The plot is old but the choral observation is fresh, and gives point and spice to the story.

"It's her goodness that has caused all the trouble. Why on earth didn't she have an affair with Morton? Charlie would have known nothing about it and wouldn't have been a penny the worse . . ."

"There is such a thing as virtue, you know."

"Virtue be damned. A virtue that only causes havoc and unhappiness is worth nothing . . . I call it cowardice . . . she could have remained faithful to him in spirit . . . If they'd gone to bed together Charlie would be alive today. It's her damned virtue that caused the whole trouble . . .

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

I prefer a loose woman to a selfish one and a wanton to a fool."

"The Round Dozen" is an amusing story of a bigamist and his twelfth conquest. Mortimer Ellis had his original in real life, a notorious bigamist who had been dead many years when this story was written. His fantastic career caught the author's fancy, and he attempts to let the "criminal" state his own case. He does so with considerable success, and not without conviction and charm. The story contains as well a perfect description of an English seaside resort, and of an antiquated family that takes its holiday there in dreadful formality.

"The Human Element" is the least successful of the six stories, partly because the reader is not concerned over the turpitude of the heroine or the anguish of her priggish worshipper, and partly because the narrative stops too frequently for the author's little personal essays. But "The Human Element" is only relatively unsuccessful; it is interesting and readable, especially after the essay-like beginning. The surprise ethical twist at the end is less convincing than usual. Carruthers has just related to the author the story of his great disillusion —his discovery that the woman he loved and admired for her courage, frankness, and intelligence had had for years her handsome footman as her lover.

WRITER OF SHORT STORIES

"She's just a sham and she's never been anything else."

"I wonder if that's true. Do you think any of us are all of a piece? Do you know what strikes me? I should have said that Albert was only the instrument, her toll to the solid earth, so to speak, that left her soul at liberty to range the empyrean. Perhaps the fact that he was so far below her gave her a sense of freedom . . . The spirit is very strange, it never soars so high as when the body has wallowed for a period in the gutter."

Carruthers' reply strikes one as correct: "Don't talk such rot."

"The Alien Corn" is a suave and wise study of a Jewish family trying desperately hard to smother their racial characteristics and become entirely English. The story has not only depth and wisdom, but an unexpected tolerance and sympathy as well. Somerset Maugham is not always cynical. Although the story is enlivened by such remarks as "The divine fire burns most efficiently in those who temper its fury with horse sense," or "It is strange that men, inhabitants for so short a while of an alien and inhuman world, should go out of their way to cause themselves so much unhappiness," the childlike Blands are described without irony, and the pathetic failure of their nonconforming son to become a great pianist moves us to pity.

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

The two remaining stories in *First Person Singular* are humorous. The humor is like that of *Home and Beauty*, pungent and biting, and the plots, improbable and farcical, justify the title given to the French translation of the collection, *Amours Singulières*. "Jane" is a very funny version of the ugly duckling theme of eternal interest: a middle-aged woman, dowdy, old-fashioned, and plain, astonishes her friends by marrying a young man deeply in love with her. She surrenders to beauty specialists and dressmakers, who rejuvenate her. The strange marriage is a great success until Jane, bored with the inane conversation of youth, deserts her husband for an older man of parts. The story is fantastic but packed with amusing surprises. Into "The Creative Impulse," the author's most diverting story, he packs his contempt for the arty, the high-brow, the Chelsea-Greenwich Village *literati*. Satire is here in plenty, but its sting is lost in the comedy of Mrs. Forrester's *salon* with its mumbo-jumbo of literary conversation, and in the common humanity of Mrs. Forrester's low-brow husband. The climax comes when Mr. Forrester deserts this cathedral of the intelligentsia and elopes with the cook, who shares his taste for penny-dreadfuls. "The Creative Impulse" should not be judged as realism; the author takes advantage of exaggeration, burlesque, and

WRITER OF SHORT STORIES

high improbability to create his comedy. It is a superb piece of satirical humour.



IN 1933 was published *Ah King*, a collection of six stories of the Malay States. They are prefaced by a brief account of the Chinese boy who acted as the author's servant during a six months' journey through Borneo, Indo-China, and Siam. Ah King was the perfect servant, accomplished, good-natured, dependable, clean. When the journey ended, the author was amazed to find Ah King in tears. "It had never occurred to me for an instant that he looked upon me as anything but an odd, rather silly person who paid his wages . . . That he had any feeling for me never entered my head. I was embarrassed . . . He wept because he was leaving me. It is for these tears that I now give his name to this collection of stories." Perhaps Somerset Maugham's incomprehension in this case is significant; there may be more simple, unselfish affection in heaven and earth than is dreamt of in his philosophy.

Ah King might well have been named *The Unaccountability of Man*. These stories show man under emotional stress behaving not like chemicals in a test-tube but in unpredictable and startling

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

fashion. The rigid moralist would like to fix cause and effect absolutely. He would have us believe that a certain action inevitably brings a certain remorse or shame; another action inevitably brings exultation or satisfaction. Somerset Maugham rejects the conception of an orderly moral universe—for no two people are the same, and absolute truth does not exist. Not only *Ah King* but most of his fiction is concerned with unanticipated human behavior. In real life the actions of our closest friends often surprise us; perhaps we are too rigorous in our demand that characters in fiction do always the explicable or expected action.

In "Footprints in the Jungle" perpetrators of a heinous crime cease, after a number of years, to suffer remorse when it becomes apparent that their guilt will never be detected. "The Book-Bag" with great delicacy reveals the incestuous love of a seemingly normal girl for her brother. Upon his marriage, she kills herself; her suicide is a selfish deed that wrecks her brother's marriage. One sentence in "The Book-Bag" might serve as the theme of the collection: "But human beings are incalculable and he is a fool who tells himself that he knows what a man is capable of." "The Vessel of Wrath" is a comic version of "Rain," with the sex of the principals reversed. A grim missionary who "with the ferocity of an avenging angel sought out the good

WRITER OF SHORT STORIES

in her fellow-men," spinsterish and desiccated, not only reforms a drunken ruffian but marries him. Agitated by an irresistible sex-attraction the scamp has for her, she leads him to the nuptial couch, half-persuading herself to believe she is concerned only with his spiritual salvation. The humor is dry and tart, but the story is genuinely amusing from the third page to the exquisite last line. "The Door of Opportunity" is the story of a Colonial official who makes the fatal mistake of appearing cowardly before the natives. In spite of his good qualities his white friends renounce him, and his wife leaves him in disgust. "The Back of Beyond" seems to be just another stereotyped story of adultery until we reach the end. Then a character, obviously the author's mouthpiece, throws numerous bombs of shocking advice, unconventional if not immoral, at the outraged husband, and provides a startling ending somewhat like that of "Footprints in the Jungle" or "Virtue." The speaker many years before in righteous indignation had divorced his wife when he discovered her infidelity. Now he regrets his action and advises a fellow-cuckold: "If I had the sense I have now I'll tell you what I'd do if I found my wife had been unfaithful to me. I'd do just what you did last night: I'd give her a damned good hiding and let it go at that . . . I'm merely advising you not to cut off your nose to spite your

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

face . . . one mustn't expect gratitude . . . you do good because it gives you pleasure. It's the purest form of happiness there is. To expect thanks for it is really asking too much . . . [your wife] will have a lot to forgive, too . . . you're behaving generously . . . one needs a devil of a lot of tact to get people to forgive one's generosity. Fortunately women are frivolous and they very quickly forget the benefits conferred upon them." "Neil Macadam" is the author's most erotic story. A nymphomaniac free of all inhibitions has designs upon a puritanical young Scotsman, who, however, succeeds in repulsing her. Insanely following him in the jungle she becomes lost and perishes. There is no spirit of burlesque as in *Joseph Andrews*, no cynical laughs at Neil's virginity, and the story is completely free of pornography. It is a straightforward and exciting study of two strongly contrasted personalities in a fight to the finish. Somerset Maugham must have been amused at the ending—virtue triumphs, and the wages of sin is death.



RAY LONG (who considered "The Book-Bag" the best short story he ever read) commissioned Somerset Maugham to write a number of stories for the *Cosmopolitan* magazine brief enough to be printed

WRITER OF SHORT STORIES

on two opposite pages of the magazine. The restriction imposed upon the author was a salutary one, for it proved to him how many useless words clutter up a page, and it curbed what he terms his natural verbosity. In 1936 these stories (written between 1924 and 1929) were collected and published under the title *Cosmopolitans*—a very apt title. The settings of the twenty-nine stories range from the Far East to a Somerset farmhouse, from Spain and Latin America to Heaven itself. The stories are entirely successful in the brief form; and although some of them could be extended into a novel, there is no impression of condensation, no telegraphic poverty of style. The stories seem to move as expansively and casually as a novel, and when we recall, after completing one, how much has happened in the half dozen pages we are amazed. He does not offend his “natural predilection for completeness,” for each story has design; and each is composed for the simple purpose of entertainment. The author warns readers against reading them all at one sitting, but who could avoid doing so if he were not forced to put the book down?

Some of the stories are humorous: that of the banker whom the author mistakes for a card-sharper; the cockney woman running a hotel in Asia Minor; the woman who eats only one thing for lunch—and impoverishes the author by eating a dozen expensive dishes at Foyot’s (this is a bril-

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

lian story); the unhappy husband-to-be who forces his fiancée to break their engagement; the furious, respectable citizen whose n'er-do-well brother is successful in everything; the two madams in a Latin American city who protest against unfair competition from amateurs—American women temporarily in residence there for easy divorce; the verger, competent for sixteen years, who is discharged when his illiteracy is discovered; the American woman who achieves great success in London society by inventing a rugged husband and past (she had already appeared in *Our Better*s). Some are starkly tragic: the story of the four fat Dutchmen whose great friendship is brought to a catastrophic end by jealousy; the young artist who becomes a beggar in Vera Cruz; the Dutchman who is followed all over the East by an offended native and finally assassinated; the Russian who murders his wife. Some are simple sketches of human goodness or idealism. One story is in reality a familiar essay—on poker. Some are satires, such as “The Judgment Seat”: God rewards conventional morality, which brought misery to the three concerned, with neither heaven nor hell, but oblivion; or “Louise,” the story of the worst of tyrants, the weakling who uses her weakness as an irresistible weapon against the strong. When one reads *Cosmopolitans* he does not wonder that Somerset Maugham is generally regarded as one of the most readable authors of our time.

Part V

CRITIC AND TRAVELLER

IN ADDITION to fiction and plays, Somerset Maugham has written two books about Spain, a volume of Chinese sketches, a book describing a journey through Burmah, the Shan States, Siam, and Indo-China, prefaces to his own novels and plays, prefaces to half a dozen books by friends, and a volume, somewhat autobiographical in nature, in which he defines his aesthetic and philosophical beliefs. These books are difficult to catalogue. His books of travel, for instance, are crammed with anecdote and philosophy, for although a great traveller, he is interested in man rather than places. His "autobiography" tells practically nothing of the external events of his life. For readers who enjoy the savor of good prose and shrewd observations on men, literature, ethics, beauty, art, and the meaning of life, *On a Chinese Screen*, *The Gentleman in the Parlour*, and *Don Fernando* are to be recommended. They have the mellowness of a rare old wine; they are not only palatable but piquant and civilized.



WHEN a young man Somerset Maugham made more than one visit to Spain, and his early interest in Spanish life, art, and literature has grown with the passing years. In 1905 he published *The Land of the Blessed Virgin, Sketches and Impressions of Andalusia*. It is the work of a young man in love with the romantic country, its landscapes, its women, its folklore, its sun—have any pagan people been such fervid sun-worshippers as the English? It is the author's most enthusiastic book, and its warmth and agreeableness are often infectious. He is now somewhat embarrassed by its spurts of fine writing, its superlatives, its flash and high color. But *The Land of the Blessed Virgin*, after all, is the work of Somerset Maugham, not of Richard Halliburton. There is much sly humor, and an occasional passage reminds us that the author was capable of writing *Liza of Lambeth*. He writes of the grotesque ugliness of old Spanish women, and some of his landscapes are as sinister and terrible as those in Browning's "Childe Roland." His analysis of the national habit of lying is humorous and tolerant. He does not defend the sport of bull-fighting—in fact, disdaining fastidiousness and euphemism he writes

CRITIC AND TRAVELLER

a description of a bull-fight that is all but sickening—but he is amused by the self-righteous attitude of English who are shocked by it. “The English humanity to animals is one of the best traits of a great people, and they can justly thank God they are not as others are. Can anything more horrid be imagined than to kill a horse in the bull-ring, and can any decent hack ask for a better end when he is broken down, than to be driven to death in London streets or to stand for hours on cab ranks in the rain and snow of an English winter? The Spaniards are certainly cruel to animals; on the other hand they never beat their wives or kick their children. From the dog’s point of view I would ten times sooner be English, but from the woman’s—I have my doubts.”

In the last chapter the boyish enthusiasm is dimmed. How disillusioning is travel, how much more delightful is anticipation than the actual visit! How much better to stay at home and read travel books! (Could any one be less sincere than the author in this passage?) And what has he gained from his visit to Spain? A sympathy with the Spaniard’s lack of seriousness, his insouciance. Why hurry, why read endless books and debate insoluble questions, why pile up money and take so little time to live? Then he saw a train come in with a number of Cuban soldiers. They were miserable wretches, ill and starving, shocking evidence of Spanish feckless-

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

ness and remissness. Their easy-going philosophy had brought decay. "And now all that they have left is their sunshine and the equanimity which nothing can disturb." The sanguinary civil war has probably convinced the author that even Spanish behavior is unpredictable! In spite of its bleak ending, *The Land of the Blessed Virgin* is for the most part a cheerful book, the record of the happy period in the author's life when the success of *Liza of Lambeth* encouraged him to give up the medical profession and devote himself to literature. His first gesture of liberation was to flee from Lambeth to the sun and color of Seville.



IT WAS not until 1922 that his second book of travel sketches, *On a Chinese Screen*, appeared. In the meantime the author had made a systematic study of English prose style and the great stylists, and had striven to perfect his own style. *On a Chinese Screen* is a vastly better written book than *The Land of the Blessed Virgin*. It is warm but not effusive; there is humor without exaggeration and irony without bitterness; it has the simplicity and lucidity of Swift and Voltaire, but in addition a quiet elegance not always present in the pages of these two

CRITIC AND TRAVELLER

austere masters. The collection contains fifty-eight sketches, some less than a page in length, only two with more than twelve pages. Some are miniature portraits, some are vignettes or brief landscapes, two or three are technically short stories, some are anecdotes. Many were intended for further elaboration, but the author changed his mind and published them in their original form. They are sketches but by no means sketchy, and in their incompleteness achieve often a finished perfection which amplification would injure.

These memorable word-pictures tell us much about China, but much more about Somerset Maugham. We learn what we have suspected before—that he is at times a sentimentalist. He reveals a tolerant understanding even in the cameo portraits of types that repel him. He exhibits a sensitiveness to beauty that is far deeper than the formal appraisal of the aesthete. He shows himself sensitive not only to the amusing irony of life, but to its tragic, soul-disturbing over-tones. He can feel pity and homesickness and the beauty of holiness. Those who dismiss Somerset Maugham as a cynic with a quirk in his soul that makes him see man and his motives awry should read "The Fannings," a portrait of a genuinely unselfish wife and mother; "Rain," a very human confession of nostalgia; "The Grand Style," a tribute to a gentleman; "Romance,"

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

which reveals an unexpected strain of mysticism in the author; "The Beast of Burden" and "The Song of the River," which show a compassion for the harassed coolies that Galsworthy himself could not express with more feeling; "The Servants of God" and "The Stranger," which reveal his humility before the good works of the Catholic missionaries; "The Old Timer," a hearty picture of happy old age.

On a Chinese Screen, however, is by no means a sentimental book. The author does not distort or judge or condemn, but reports what he sees and feels. There is ugliness to report as well as beauty, cruelty as well as kindness, silliness as well as dignity. He is not overcome with respect and admiration for the consuls, missionaries, company managers, and army officers who hold the gorgeous East in fee for Lombard Street. The exotic life in China often brings out the worst in the Colonials—their intolerance, provincialism, pompousness, qualities a narrowly circumscribed life in England might not have uncovered. Few of the Britons sketched in this book are admirable men and women. A woman ignorant of Chinese art and decoration proudly makes her living room a duplicate of hundreds of florid rooms in Tunbridge Wells. The intense ennui and the petty jealousies of the Colonials are ill-concealed at their boring dinner parties. A missionary

CRITIC AND TRAVELLER

is unable to conquer the violent hatred for the Chinese he strives to convert. An "irritable, bumptious, and tiresome little man," a consul, is ignorant of fear—"If their manners were as good as their courage is great, they [the British] would merit the opinion they have of themselves." A Bertrand Russell type of liberal, churning with democratic idealism, kicks and curses a careless rickshaw boy. A young medical missionary puts aside his idealism in order to amass a fortune. A narrow-minded, puritanical missionary refuses to associate with an agent of a tobacco company. An official of the tobacco company closes his eyes and mind to the racy life about him and spends all his spare time reading lurid American magazines. The Protestant missionaries close up their city missions when the weather becomes uncomfortable. At their harshest these portraits express an amused contempt; there is not the bitterness of *For Services Rendered*.

There is some humor in the book. Unforgettable is the missionary lady whose conversation is a devastating cascade of platitudes, or the solemn scholar of the drama who is shocked at the notion of *entertainment* on the stage. There are harrowing sketches, too—that of the taipan who sees his own grave being dug; the execution of a wretched prisoner; the miserable coolies who are literally beasts of burden. There is philosophy as well. In one brilliant section

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

a Chinese philosopher analyzes the culture of the East and the West. There is poetry—"The Rising of the Curtain," "Dawn," "The Road," "Ara-besque"; there is even—God save the mark!—a dash of whimsy in "Rain." One may pay to the book what Somerset Maugham would consider the greatest of compliments: it is readable from cover to cover.



THE year 1930 is memorable in Somerset Maugham's life, for in that year *Cakes and Ale* and *The Gentleman in the Parlour* were published, and *The Bread-winner* was first performed. *The Gentleman in the Parlour* is one of the most charming of travel books. It was written in high spirits but with great care, for the author was as much concerned with style as with content. He says in his preface to the book, "If you like language for its own sake, if it amuses you to string words together in the order that most pleases you, so as to produce an effect of beauty, the essay or travel book gives you an opportunity. Here prose may be cultivated for its own sake." In *The Gentleman in the Parlour* he escapes the dangers inherent in all exercises in style—florid passages, monotonous patterns and rhythms, undue

CRITIC AND TRAVELLER

subordination of matter to method. His prose is supple, lucid, pungent. It is rarely embroidered, never langorous. (Mr. Maugham has said that when he has finished an essay by Walter Pater he knows how a trout feels when he is taken off the hook and lies flapping on the grass.) His sentences have dignity but they are not pompous, and he skilfully adjusts the character and flow of his words and phrases to demands of the material—description, anecdote, reflection, or philosophy. *The Gentleman in the Parlour* is Mr. Maugham's favorite among his own books.

Somerset Maugham is well qualified to write good books of travel. He is a realist and indulges in no bogus enthusiasms. There is no fraudulent emotion about the mystery of the East. On the other hand *The Gentleman in the Parlour* is not a “debunking” book of travel like *Innocents Abroad*, for Somerset Maugham not only shares Mark Twain's sincerity, but in addition possesses a great tolerance and a wide culture. That which would enrage Mark Twain amuses Somerset Maugham; he accepts, as far as is humanly possible, life and people on their own terms wherever he goes, and if he is confronted by mystery he cannot penetrate, he is not ashamed to be humble before it. Perhaps his best qualification (aside from the fact that he is an excellent writer) is that he has greater interest in people than

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

in places. Few readers today can tolerate long descriptions of scenery, and rhapsodies over beauty in far-away places are extremely tiresome. In *The Gentleman in the Parlour* we never lose sight of the fact that Mandalay, Saigon, Haiphong, King Tung, and the jungle itself are real places where men and women live, work, eat, make love, suffer. "Then it seemed to me that in these countries of the East the most impressive, the most awe-inspiring monument of antiquity is neither temple, nor citadel, nor great wall, but man. The peasant with his im-memorial usages belongs to an age far more ancient than Angkor Wat, the great wall of China, or the Pyramids of Egypt." Moreover the occasional companions of the author's travels are sharply and expertly drawn from life; they are as real and complete as the characters of *Cakes and Ale*.

The book is enlivened by a diversity of topics. Description, narration, fantasy, and philosophy are adroitly mixed to prevent monotony. There is a pleasant use of the unexpected. The book begins with a personal essay on Hazlitt (whose essay "On Going a Journey" provides the title of the book), a clever appraisal of Hazlitt and his more generally beloved contemporary Lamb. There are brief familiar essays on such subjects as imperialism, humor, solitaire, shyness, food, justification of evil, English prose, and love of mediocrity, and a half dozen nar-

CRITIC AND TRAVELLER

ratives. He insists that he is a bad traveller, for he has little gift of surprise, and takes things for granted so very quickly that he is not struck by the unusual in his surroundings. "It seems to me just as natural to ride in a rickshaw as in a car, and to sit on the floor as on a chair . . . I travel because I like to move from place to place . . . it pleases me to be rid of ties, responsibilities, duties, I like the unknown; I meet odd people . . . I am often tired of myself and I have a notion that by travel I can add to my personality and so change myself a little." Consequently the subject matter of his travel books is different from that of most such books. He is never condescending or patronizing in describing dress, food, religion, or manners of the natives. He has no eye for the merely quaint or picturesque and is not surprised by the abnormal, for he knows how rare the normal is. For example, in the account of his visit to a Buddhist monastery he mentions so casually that the monks smoked cheroots while chanting their prayers that the reader feels no surprise whatever.

The poet which is latent in all men is less successfully concealed in *The Gentleman in the Parlour* than in any of the author's earlier books. He seems to be fonder of the decorative metaphor. "The night fell softly as a green leaf in summer falls softly to the ground." "I found that in my recollections, so

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

vague and uncertain, the Shwe Dagon rose superb as on that first morning it had risen, glistening with its gold, like a sudden hope in the dark night of the soul of which the mystics write . . ." "The trees and the moat are drenched in radiance." "When I went down the steps and untethered my pony, silence, like an old mad woman with a finger on her lips, crept past me into the room that I had left." "With the last light of day a white flock of egrets, like haphazard thoughts that flit through the mind without reason or sequence, fluttered disorderly down the tranquil stream." An occasional simile is downright literary. "The uneventful days followed one another like the rhymed couplets of a didactic poem." "The village street was bordered by tamarinds and they were like the sentences of Sir Thomas Browne, opulent, stately and self-possessed." "A grove of areca palms . . . immensely tall and slender, with the gaunt precision . . . and intellectual nakedness of a collection of apothegms."

More characteristic are the many asides, some merely humorous, others iconoclastic and biting. "I am afraid of people with too much charm." "Lamb's emotion, to my mind, too often suggests the facile lachrymosity of the alcoholic." ". . . that agreeable type that applies commonsense to the accidents of life and so sees them in a faintly ridiculous aspect." "The lot of the English and the American humorist

CRITIC AND TRAVELLER

is hard, for pornography rather than brevity is the soul of wit." "Give a fool a uniform and sew a tab or two on his tunic and he thinks his word is law." "Men are more interesting than books, but have this defect that you cannot skip them." "It is very difficult to put the happiness of someone you love before your own." "I have often asked myself how the characters of Henry James in the intervals of subtly examining their situation coped with the physiological necessities of their bodies." "I am suspicious of a sensibility of the artist and I have often dissipated a whole train of exquisite and sombre thoughts by administering to myself a little liver pill." The book ends with a remark by an odious, but generous and amusing Jewish commercial traveller: "I'll give you my opinion of the human race in a nutshell, brother; their heart's in the right place, but their head's a thoroughly inefficient organ."



ONE book of Somerset Maugham's which has attracted comparatively few readers is *Don Fernando* (1935), a labor of love. He wrote it with delight, not unaware that its audience would be few, however fit. It is not the book about Spain that he had

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

long wanted to write; it is an account of his long preparation and extensive reading to equip him to write of Spain in the Golden Age. His reading of several hundred books about Spain of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries yielded much information about the manners, religion, literature, and eccentric personalities of the time. *Don Fernando* is a strange mixture of summaries of books; discourses on art, aesthetics, drama, theatre, mysticism, picaresque fiction, and everyday life of the time; and shrewd studies of eminent Spaniards of the age—St. Ignatius Loyola, St. Teresa, Lope de Vega, Calderon, El Greco, Velasquez, Fray Louis de Leon, Cervantes, Espinal. Somerset Maugham had been devoted to Spain since his first visit there in the 1890's, and a dozen subsequent visits did not diminish his enthusiasm. He wanted to write of Spain in the Golden Age, and he steeped himself in the literature of the period. He had long planned to write a novel with a young Englishman or Scotsman in Spain as the hero. He finally abandoned his plan of writing a novel, and for a very strange reason: in Cadiz he was struck by a picture by Zurbaran of some Carthusian monks, one of whom was an Englishman, Blessed John Houghton. The author could not get the English monk's face out of his mind. Whenever he thought of his novel, Blessed John was the hero. It was impossible to write a

CRITIC AND TRAVELLER

novel about a gentleman monk with exquisite manners. The novel was never written.

Don Fernando is a masterpiece of English prose. It combines grandeur with intimacy and subtlety with lucidity. It would be difficult to think of a more civilized book. The reader who cares for excellent prose, is intelligent and curious, and has some interest in the Renaissance will cherish *Don Fernando*. But the subject matter is not of vast appeal, and more readers begin the book than end it. It must be admitted that the summaries of plots of picaresque novels and of plays become tiresome. However, these narratives have one virtue that is altogether praiseworthy: they are intelligible. When Shakespeare wished to express in a metaphor the meaninglessness and chaos of life he said it is a tale told by an idiot, for he well knew that a tale told even by a sane man is often incoherent. Mr. Maugham's comments on Lope de Vega, Cervantes, Calderon, and other writers are sharp and pungent, and the analysis of the art of El Greco, for example, prepares the average reader to see what he otherwise would overlook in the strenuous canvases of that strange artist. He makes living people of St. Teresa and St. Ignatius Loyola, and arouses an impatience to reread *Don Quixote*.

Don Fernando is an answer to Somerset Maugham's critics who dismiss him merely as a

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

cynic, for the book is written in high spirits, and without bitterness. In 1600 it is estimated that nearly one-third of all Spaniards were in the church; religion dominated Spanish life. Mr. Maugham treats the church and religion with understanding and tolerance, and religious idiosyncrasy disturbs him no more than does the fantastic costume of Siam. He displays not only an astonishing familiarity with, and appreciation of, religious pictures, but a sympathetic understanding of mystical experience. He recognizes "mystic rapture" in El Greco's pictures, but he does not regard mysticism as essentially religious. This awareness of truth unknown to the intellect, this mysterious union of the individual self with a higher reality, "the dissolution of the self into a wider self," accompanied by a sense of enlarged power and keenness of vision, may be excited by other means than religious ecstasy. Somerset Maugham says it may come from love or opium or a glass of cold beer or prayer and fasting. The test of its value, whatever the source, is its ability to strengthen character.

Although bitterness is lacking and the author outdoes himself in tolerance and understanding, the flavor of the book is not sweet but dry. He can be amused by human weakness without being either bitter or condescending. He is never unaware of man's vast power of self-deception, his comfortable

CRITIC AND TRAVELLER

habit of substituting good reasons for real reasons. One is delighted to discover occasionally such a characteristic observation as this: "I think I am not wrong in saying that in our day, on the other hand, the passion misnamed tender has a very small hold on the lover till the first cocktail has brought its solace, and its violence can be held within the bounds of common sense till after business hours." Sweetness and light will never ensnare him.



No book ever written is more accurately named than *The Summing Up*. There is nothing new in the book for the reader familiar with Mr. Maugham's other books and his various prefaces; it is a summing up of his ideas on literature, art, ethics, religion, and drama, with an occasional reference to some event in his life. The narrative element, however, is exasperatingly slight; he combines the Frenchman's passion for analysis with the Englishman's reticence about his private life. *The Summing Up* does not pretend to be an autobiography; it is a summing up of ideas and theories that for so long have floated at haphazard in the various depths of his consciousness. He asserts that the book was written to disembarrass his soul of certain notions

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

which would give him no peace until they found some sort of orderly expression. It was one of the books, like *Of Human Bondage* and *For Services Rendered*, which unwritten would allow the author no peace of mind.

His literary and aesthetic theories had already been ventilated in previous books. He has brilliantly discussed the drama in the six prefaces to his collected plays; fiction in the prefaces of his collected works; the short story in *Fifty Modern English Writers*. Comments on art and artists are frequent from *The Land of the Blessed Virgin* to *Don Fernando*. Remarks on style and analyses of the methods of Ruskin, Pater, Swift, Voltaire, Meredith, Dryden, and other stylists are to be found in prefaces, novels, and books of travel. His religion and philosophy of life are practically the same as Philip's at the conclusion of *Of Human Bondage*. Philip, too, conceived of the events of his life forming a definite pattern which he could observe. His views on the problem of evil are precisely those of *The Gentleman in the Parlour* and *Of Human Bondage*. Beginning with his exultant and boyish "emancipation" in Heidelberg he has consistently and naturally rejected idealism and wishful thinking concerning poetic justice, immortality, the value of suffering, and free will. Not in *The Summing Up* or in his previous books does one find any discussion

CRITIC AND TRAVELLER

of political and social questions, which have never seemed to him of great significance however noisy the temporary commotion they at times arouse. Because of this indifference Somerset Maugham has been somewhat ignored by critics of the Left, who wield considerable influence, as well as by the advance-guard who can tolerate only the stream-of-consciousness novel and the expressionistic drama.

Somerset Maugham has not, however, remained static through all these years. Many experiences of later life have served to confirm early beliefs and doubts, but other experiences have forced him to abandon prejudices. He has grown more tolerant, and although he has become no less sceptical of human goodness and intelligence, he is more resigned to accept mankind with these defects and is less cynical. Although an agnostic convinced that "there is no reason for life and life has no meaning," and that man is doomed to disappear, he is not an abject pessimist. He wisely remarks that much pessimism results from ascribing to others the feelings one would have were he in their place. He thinks that gradually superstition is yielding to science, and that many cruelties and evils will become less common. He has made many mistakes, but being a determinist he does not lament them with inane regret. He has arrived at a philosophy of life that brings him considerable satisfaction. He enters

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

old age without complaint and awaits with equanimity the unknowable future. To the oft-made charge of cynicism he makes his customary retort: many people, unused to truth, mistake it for cynicism; he does not admit that he is cynical because he refuses to attach great importance to virtues and to be revolted by men's vices; he also does not admit that he makes men out worse than they are, but he does not obviously praise what is good in them and what is bad.

The Summing Up reveals no decline in the tolerance and humanity revealed in *The Gentleman in the Parlour* and *Don Fernando*. All are books by a disillusioned but kindly and uncensorious man of the world. Although he is agnostic and mechanistic in his convictions, his ethics and philosophy are not without backbone and sinew. He agrees with Emerson that one should live according to his own nature, which is more difficult than living according to other men's commandments. He rejects "art for art's sake," and asserts that art can be considered one of the great values of life only if it teach men humility, tolerance, wisdom, and magnanimity. The value of art, he declares, is not beauty but right action. He even agrees with Tolstoi that great and significant art is not the plaything of a group, but a picture or poem or sonata or skyscraper that all may (not do) enjoy. So he denies intrinsic goodness to

CRITIC AND TRAVELLER

beauty as well as to truth. He concludes that goodness alone in a fantastic world can claim to be an end in itself. Virtue is its own reward! What a conclusion for a discussion of truth, beauty and goodness by Somerset Maugham! This conclusion must surprise many readers, for they expect a stone (glittering and hard) and receive bread instead. When now and then he has come across real goodness he has found reverence rise naturally in his heart . . . goodness is the only reality, he concludes, in a world which often seems unsubstantial . . . The recollection of it brings happiness.

This sincere if commonplace conclusion gives a lift to a book which even without it would not be uninspiring. Philosophically a pessimist and unable to support himself by the props of the ordinary optimist—belief in a divine and good plan, in rewards, punishments, and immortality, Somerset Maugham would hardly be expected to lay bare a cheerful philosophy of life. But for all its nihilism *The Summing Up* is strangely buoyant. Here is a man who, like Thoreau, has lived curiously and intensely and who has succeeded in adjusting himself to the world he lives in. *The Summing Up*, like *Walden*, is the confession of an individualist whose experimental design for a fit life has not proved unsuccessful. It is not to be wondered at that he closes his book with a favorite passage from Fray

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

Luis de Leon: "The beauty of life is nothing but this, that each should act in conformity with his nature and his business." Emerson's "Trust Thyself" must be preached anew to each generation, and no age has needed the teaching more than our own. Somerset Maugham belongs to that small and great company of individualists who encourage man to act in conformity with his own nature and his own business.



MR. MAUGHAM has written prefaces to a large number of his own books, and brief introductions to half a dozen books by friends. In addition he has edited an anthology of modern prose and poetry, *Fifty Modern English Writers*, with illuminating essays on the novel, short story, essay, and poem. In 1924 he contributed a short introduction to the posthumously published memoirs of Charles Hawtrey, who had died in 1923. Hawtrey was a talented comedian who had acted leading rôles in *Smith*, *The Noble Spaniard*, and *Home and Beauty*. Mr. Maugham pays tribute to his skill as an actor, his unfailing sense of the ridiculous, and his capacity for laughter. In 1929 he composed a rather non-committal preface for *Two Made Their Bed*, a novel

CRITIC AND TRAVELLER

by Louis Marlow (Louis U. Wilkinson). In the same year he wrote an enthusiastic introduction to *Our Puppet Show*, a collection of essays on the theatre by a friend, the eminent French dramatist Francis de Croisset. Mr. Maugham tries to answer the eternal question, What's wrong with the theatre? and incidentally reveals thorough knowledge of the French drama. Late in 1929 Noel Coward published *Bitter Sweet and Other Plays with a Few Comments on the Younger Generation by W. Somerset Maugham*. The two writers have long been friends, and the older dramatist has furnished Mr. Coward with the plot of more than one play, among them the ill-fated *Point Valaine* and *Fumed Oak*, a cockney version of *The Breadwinner*. In the preface Mr. Maugham announces his approaching retirement as a dramatist, and discusses realism in stage dialogue. In 1931 Frederick Bason compiled a bibliography of Somerset Maugham's writings. To this bibliography, which in spite of inaccuracies is not without value, Mr. Maugham contributed an amusing foreword. He also wrote a preface to Mr. Bason's *Gallery Unreserved* (1931). His most interesting preface he wrote for the autobiography of Doris Arthur-Jones, daughter of his old friend Henry Arthur-Jones. *What a Life!* is an apt title for the amusing book. Mr. Maugham in his preface

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

airs some of his favorite opinions, and expresses his amusement at the author's energetic interest in celebrities. He comments on her un-British devotion to her family and hazards the opinion that "the British Empire would never have reached its great extent if the English had not on the whole found their relations very boring." Less characteristic on the surface is an optimistic statement, in which the uncompromising moralist, however, will detect an irritating cynicism: "On the whole I should say that fate is on the side of leniency; things come righter in the end than often we have any right to expect, and few of us, mercifully, have to suffer for our faults, follies and errors as much as we might."



THE editor of a leading American literary review has said that Somerset Maugham is the most competent of professional writers. To be sure, Mr. Maugham consistently calls himself a *professional* writer, but what significance has this term in the twentieth century? In former centuries *gentlemen* often entertained a mean idea of letters as a profession and published under pseudonyms. Voltaire in *Letters Concerning the English Nation* writes of Congreve:

CRITIC AND TRAVELLER

"Mr. Congreve had one defect, which was his entertaining too mean an idea of his own first profession, that of a writer, though it was to this he owed his fame and fortune. He spoke of his works as trifles that were beneath him, and hinted to me in our first conversation, that I should visit him upon no other foot than that of a gentleman . . . I answered that had he been so unfortunate as to be a mere gentleman, I should never have come to see him; and I was very much disgusted at so unseasonable a piece of vanity."

In America in the early nineteenth century Southern gentlemen allowed their poems and stories to circulate in manuscript among their friends, scorning publication as vulgar and sordid. If Somerset Maugham is a professional writer, must not we say the same of Flaubert, Hardy, Dostoevski, Bennett, Galsworthy, Dreiser, Virginia Woolf? To apply the adjective "professional" to Maugham in a slightly condescending or derogatory manner is as absurd as to apply similarly the word "competent."

Although he possesses a striking personality he has never exploited it; he never addresses audiences; he does not compose literary criticism for the journals; he never comments to the press on world affairs; his sense of humor and his sense of the ridiculous make him abstain from the self-advertising many modern writers indulge in; he writes his books to please himself, and makes few concessions

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

to readers' tastes. His books stand on their own feet. There is no question as to his present high reputation among intelligent readers the world over. When the years pass, what place will he assume in English literature? To the drama he has contributed three or four high comedies which have already taken their place alongside the comedies of Congreve, Sheridan, and Wilde. As long as novels are read, it is incredible that enlightened readers will fail to relish *Mrs. Craddock*, *Of Human Bondage*, *The Moon and Sixpence*, and *Cakes and Ale*. Will Philip Carey join the immortal company of Tom Jones and David Copperfield? To the short story he has brought his gifts of lucidity, precision, and irony; already regarded as classics among short stories of incident and sharply delineated character are "Red," "Rain," "The Book-Bag," and "The Outstation." Lovers of rich and simple English prose at its best will delight in *The Gentleman in the Parlour*, *Don Fernando*, and *On a Chinese Screen* for many years to come. While scholars of the future wrangle over Joyce, Proust, Pirandello, T. S. Eliot, and Rolland, the ordinary garden-variety of intelligent readers will turn with satisfaction to the lucid but stimulating pages of Somerset Maugham, who was ashamed of dullness and obscurity never of competence.

